



*The Indiscretion  
of  
Lady Usher*

*By The Author of The  
Diary of My Honeymoon*

**HOLMES BOOK CO.**

833 S. Main St.

Los Angeles

100

45

Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2007 with funding from  
Microsoft Corporation



THE INDISCRETION  
OF LADY USHER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE  
DIARY OF MY HONEYMOON

\$1.20 net. Postage, 10 cents

"The book is powerful, sensational and appalling."

—*Chicago Tribune.*

A woman of mind and heart who sets out to unburden her soul upon intimate things is bound to touch upon happenings, and to describe emotions, which are seldom the subject of writing at all; but whatever may be said of the views and opinions of the anonymous author (a famous English-woman well known in America), the Diary is a work of intense and throbbing humanity, the moral of which is sound throughout and plain to see.

THE MACAULAY COMPANY  
15 WEST 38TH STREET, NEW YORK





# THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

BY

THE AUTHOR OF "THE DIARY OF MY HONEYMOON"

NEW YORK  
THE MACAULAY COMPANY

1913

**COPYRIGHT, 1913, BY  
THE MACAULAY COMPANY**

## FOREWORD

OF the human actions set forth in this volume each of you readers must be his own judge. They are actual occurrences; and the characters with whom you will become acquainted are real people. Many of you will have known them before. From necessity, as in the forerunner of this novel, "The Diary of My Honeymoon," the men and women who figure here move through these pages under *aliases*; and the geography of the story has been changed slightly in order to conceal the identity of the actors in this all too common drama of every-day life.

Old Mrs. Grundy has long pointed her condemning finger at our own divorce statutes as being a menace to the very institution of marriage. And now we Americans are suddenly brought face to face with less of scorn—yes, and with even something like adulation. At last social critics the world over are beginning to find in our various Renos a modicum of good. Over night almost the conscience of the world has assumed a new shape. Witness, for example, the present hue and cry in England over the question of divorce. It has already grown into a public clamor.

We venture to put forth the opinion that among those who read this book there will be not one but recalls, somewhere in the wonderful, comprehensive archives of his experience of the relations of men and women, at least one unfortunate couple to whom marriage has become an intolerable bond. Perhaps

one of the parties harbors, and justly, a passionate resentment against the other, and yet finds no solution, no escape from a situation as tragic as it is pitiable.

Some think marriage a social necessity, but not necessarily a real union. Too late the scales fall from the eyes of these unhappy individuals, and they gaze, disillusioned, upon the wreck of two human lives. For such crises, should there be no relief?

Whatever conclusions you may draw from an examination of this particular working-out of world-old forces as set forth in this story, we know that if the telling turns your attention to the pressing necessity of special education and fitness for the marriage state, the anonymous author of this book will feel that her work has not been in vain.

THE PUBLISHERS.



# THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

*June 3rd.*

WHAT a gap in my diary! And what happenings to note, if only I had been industrious! I wonder if it happens to many women to be married twice before they are twenty! And I wonder whether I shall go on growing older at the rate I have maintained since that morning, three years and a few weeks ago, when I passed my seventeenth birthday at the dear old place, with my dogs and my horses and dear old Kelly and Miss Trood!

Looking back, that awful time when I was the wife of Sir Lionel Eberhard seems like a nightmare. I can't believe that it was I who went through all that terrible time, first in Paris, and then on the Riviera.

Was it really I, or was it somebody else, who went through all those dreadful experiences, and came out of them like a person who has had bad dreams?

And then afterwards! I wish I had kept up my diary, because it is interesting and queer to read later, and to see what one felt at the time it was all happening. But I was so ill when I was first left a widow, and then, when I got better, I felt such a sick, shuddery disgust at it all that I used to feel, when I took up my locked book and my pen to write again, as if the horror recalled by the diary was too much for me.

## 8 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

And so I dropped it, and just shut my eyes to what I had gone through as well as I could, and let Gerald tell me what to do.

What a troublous time that was, when I first came back to England, and how strange it seemed to be treated by my own people as if I had suddenly become a person of importance!

Dear old papa it was who let me see the first what a different position I held, as a rich widow, from that I had been in when I left England, the timid and frightened and wretched wife of a middle-aged man I didn't care for.

I remember that it was half funny and half painful to see the way papa looked at me when he met me at the station, and how civil he was, and how careful of me, and it seemed so strange, when he used to be only just good-humored and affectionate, to see him treat me as if I were a princess!

And then I understood.

And it hurt!

Only I loved him all the same. For after all, when I thought it over, it was just what I might have expected. He married me (or rather, he let mamma marry me) to Sir Lionel Eberhard because he believes that there is nothing on earth so good as to have lots of money. So that, when I became possessor of money to do what I liked with, he was overwhelmed, and felt as if it couldn't really be me, little me, that he had always looked upon as a mere child, to be treated as a baby.

Mamma was quite different. She was radiant, effervescent, almost overwhelming. For once she and papa were together that day. The idea of seeing a member of their family who had a big bank balance was so novel, and so dazzling, that it even reconciled

them for the time, for they did not want, either of them, that the other should see me first.

So I was nearly torn to pieces and hugged to death, when they met me at Charing Cross and took me with them to Brook Street, where I was to have been given the spare room, which is a beautiful big room. Only I begged that I might have the little room up at the top which I had always had before.

Of course, mamma made no secret of the way in which she regarded my widowhood. She looked upon it as a splendid thing, and a triumph for her, and papa had to stop her, a little shocked, when she began to take to herself the credit of my independent position, and then passed on to expressions of admiration at my mourning.

"Where did you get those lovely dresses, dear?" she said, as she caressed me enthusiastically. "Of course, we fair people always look well in black, but yours is quite too delicious black, and I don't think I ever saw you look so well before."

"I had them made in Paris," I answered, "and sent down to me."

"I suppose they cost an awful lot. But then, of course, that doesn't matter to you now! Oh dear, what a splendid thing it is for you, child, to have plenty of money, and to be independent for life! Now you see, my dear, what you wouldn't acknowledge before, that what I did for you was all for the best."

Papa began to fidget, and to look at her askance, as if wondering what she was going to say next. And, indeed, it did occur to me to suggest that the things that had happened could scarcely have been arranged by her too, as she seemed to imply.

## 10 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

"Of course, she knows we did our best for her," put in papa quickly, "and equally, of course, we are not responsible for the misfortunes which she has experienced so soon, in the — the loss of her husband, and all that."

"Of course not," said mamma rather sharply. "And now tell me, darling, where we shall pass the summer. Of course, you will have to be very quiet. The dear old place is let, you know, or we could have gone down there. Of course, you can't remain in town for the season!" And she sighed regretfully. "But I don't mind giving that up. I'll go with you wherever you like."

She was so effusively affectionate, and appeared so happy in my return, that I didn't like to tell her what I was going to do. But when she pressed me I had to.

"I'm going to spend the summer with Miss Trood and dear old Kelly at a cottage in North Wales, right in the country," I said. "And I certainly should never think of taking you away from your darling London during the season."

Mamma looked disappointed. So did papa. But he recovered himself the first.

"Capital notion!" he cried robustly. "You can be out of all the racket. I envy you. And look here: I shall hire a yacht. Old Langbourne wants to let his, I know — and you and I can go on a cruise together. We might do the Cowes week. It won't be too early for your mourning, will it? You're not supposed to mourn as long at sea as on land, you know."

I shook my head, and mamma cut in quickly:

"Of course, the child doesn't want to do anything of that kind. She wants to be quiet. It wouldn't do to be seen at Cowes."

"She needn't be seen any more than she likes. I'd do all the showing."

"Oh, absurd! She doesn't even like the sea. You'd much rather stay in Wales by yourself, and just have me down, and your cousin Harriet Usher, and one or two other intimate friends, just at the week-ends, wouldn't you?"

"I'm afraid you wouldn't care about it, Mamma, for the cottage is a real cottage, just a laborer's done up, and there isn't any hotel near where you could put up," I explained rather hurriedly, for I felt that it looked inhospitable on my part.

The truth was that I still felt enough resentment at the way in which I had been left to shift for myself in the midst of my awful difficulties to make me feel that I would rather be left all by myself for a little while, till the wounds had healed.

Nice as papa and mamma both were to me, and glad as I was to be with them again, I could not at once forget.

And yet I was sorry to disappoint them, and to see how disappointed they both looked, and how uneasy they both seemed to grow before the evening was over. And presently I found that each of them wanted to see me alone before the other.

Of course, mamma, being cleverer than papa, managed it.

She took me upstairs into her own room after dinner, and asked me whether I could lend her five hundred pounds.

"It is for necessary things entirely," she said convincingly, "to pay off loans and release important securities. Can you manage it, dear?"

"I think so," I said. "I shall have to ask Mr. Calstock. He does everything for me."

## 12 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

Mamma looked vexed.

"I shouldn't trust any lawyer too far," she said. "We women can manage our own business much better than they can. Of course, I'm not saying a word against Mr. Calstock. His firm has done your father's business for years. At the same time, it is better to keep one's affairs in one's own hands if possible."

"There is a great deal too much for one woman to do alone," I explained humbly. "I had no idea what a lot there is to be done in such a position as I am in. I really couldn't, ignorant as I am, manage it at all by myself."

"Of course not. But, as I say, don't trust any man too far. These lawyers want looking after."

I laughed to myself afterwards at the idea that I could supervise Mr. Calstock's supervision of my affairs, but to mamma I only said that I knew I could trust the man she and papa trusted, and that, if I could not, it would be all the same, as for me to do everything myself was impossible.

I got away as well as I could, as I didn't want to be asked any more questions about Mr. Calstock; but as soon as I got downstairs, papa took me out on the balcony, and asked me whether I would agree to hire Lord Langbourne's yacht for the season, as he couldn't afford it himself, but would like a cruise above all things.

"It would give me a little rest from the worries I have to put up with ashore," he said.

Of course, I agreed to hire the yacht, and asked how much it would cost.

"Oh, a mere nothing," said papa. "A couple of thousand, or three thousand at the outside, would pay for everything. Almost everything," he added

thoughtfully, as I promised to get that sum for him. "Perhaps, though, you'd better make it four thousand while you're about it. Then there will be a balance left, for incidental expenses."

I agreed at once, but it really seemed to me to be a great deal of money.

Both papa and mamma were very sweet to me that night, and said what a joy it was to them to have me back again.

Before papa, who was staying at the Carlton Hotel, went away, he asked whether my mother had been trying to borrow money of me, and when I hesitated, he said it was scandalous, and that I had better consult Mr. Calstock before I lent her any more, as she only wasted whatever she got.

But then, when papa had gone, mamma said much the same thing to me about papa, and though I couldn't help laughing a little when I was by myself, I didn't like it.

It did seem as if they thought more of the money than of me!

I was quite uncomfortable when I saw Mr. Calstock, as I had to do next day, and I watched his face as I asked for the large sums of money I wanted. But he asked no questions, and was very dry and quiet, only pointing out to me that even my large income would have to be carefully managed, and advising me to keep strict account of my expenditure.

I got the money, and gave it to papa and mamma, and then I went away to Wales. It was dreadful, but I was quite glad to get away, for they quarreled about me, and each seemed suspicious of the other, so that it was a relief to be alone with old Miss Trood and dear Kelly, who both cried a great deal over me, and used to look at me in a comical way as I sat

## 14 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

in my black dress in the cottage window.' And neither of the silly old things would take any view but that I must be heart-broken, and they would carefully avoid mentioning Sir Lionel's name for fear of giving me pain.

On the whole, though I was rather bored sometimes, I enjoyed my holiday, and I stayed on in the mountains till late in the autumn, not wholly because I liked it, but partly because I dreaded what would happen to me when I got away.

Both papa and mamma came to see me now and then, but papa got dreadfully low-spirited at the loneliness of the place, and because there was no place where he could play billiards and nobody to play bridge with. Mamma got cross when she came, and really the accommodation the place afforded was not quite what she had been used to. I gave up my bedroom to her, but she couldn't get used to stooping when she went to the dressing-table, which was in a little dormer window; and she complained that the looking-glass made her look blue and all over spots.

Mr. Calstock had to come down to see me on business a good many times, and I used to look forward to his visits as I had never done to any before from any one. He was always very dry, very quiet, very intent on business, and nothing else. But he gave me a sense of peace and confidence and security which nobody else did, so that I always felt restless and miserable for quite a week after he had gone away.

And then one day — we were walking along the seashore, and he had his bag in his hand, for he was going back to town — there came a moment when we both forgot to act, and — the truth came out.

I never, never felt so happy in all my life before, al-



though I knew, without any questions on the subject, how angry papa and mamma would be!

We kept our secret all through that winter, and he never said a word when I used to ask him for the money first papa and then mamma wanted.

But in the spring the truth had to be told, and then there was a terrible scene with both of them.

I'd rather not remember all they said, though I cried and laughed about it afterwards.

But it ended in our being married quietly, without any of our relations to see us, and then there came a great change, and both papa and mamma grew civil.

Papa, who had talked about changing his lawyer, gave up the idea, while mamma took quite a fancy to Gerald, and said what a fine, intellectual face he had.

But I think he was a little more intellectual than she cared for him to be, for he at once, when we were married, put a stop to the presents I had been making, and insisted that papa and mamma should each be content with what they both at different times and in different ways called "a paltry thousand a year."

As for me, I was so happy that these little irritations scarcely troubled me. I loved Gerald with all my heart, and I was happy. He took a house in Curzon Street, and we have been there all the summer, ever since that short trip abroad—only two weeks—which was all that he could spare from his work.

Work, work! I sometimes ask him why he works so hard, when, if he liked, he could "take it easy" on what I have got. But he is too proud to do that, and he's ambitious besides, both for himself and for

## 16 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

me, and he is not content to be the rich Lady Cecilia's husband.

I shouldn't like him to be.

But still, it is hard to have him away so much, at the office all day, and shut up in his study half the night, and working at his cases on Sunday too! I should like to have him more to myself, although I love him so much that I would rather have him on his terms, and see him as little as I do, than have married any other man in the world.

I think papa and mamma are both a little afraid of him—certainly papa is. For they haven't been here very often in the month that has passed since we came back from our honeymoon, and the other old friends who have been to see me I don't care very much about.

It was a real pleasure to me to-day when Harriet Usher called.

I don't think anything that has happened has brought home to me so strongly the change my two marriages have made in me as this visit of Harriet's.

I remember when I was a girl, at Four Oaks, she used to seem to me a dreadful person. Now I am glad to have her.

And yet there is something almost uncanny about her still, with her transparent white skin, with the pink color that comes and goes so easily in her cheeks. I am quite sure her hair used to be red, and that Jack used to laugh at her and call her "carrots." But now it is quite a pretty shade, like a woman in an Italian picture. But she does everything too well to be accused of anything so horrid as dyeing her hair or making up her face. But the freckles have disappeared, and I should like to know how it came about, only I think it might be indiscreet to ask.

She never used to like me, and I hated her, but to-day I was sorry for her, even while I sat looking at her and thinking what an attractive, graceful woman she is, and how exquisitely she dresses. She looked like a beautiful snake in that shot green dress, with the shimmering beads and the double row of pearls round her neck.

She seems to be unhappily married, and, as she said, I can sympathize, having gone through as much myself. She is going to take me to Hurlingham with her to-morrow.

Dear Gerald was pleased, when he came home to dinner, to hear that one of my cousins had called on me, and that I should have some one to go about with.

And yet I can't help an odd sort of feeling — I haven't the least idea why — that if he knew Harriet, he wouldn't be quite so pleased at my knowing her and at the idea of my going about with her.

Why do I feel like this? I don't quite know myself.

CURZON STREET,

*June 6th.*

I HAVE had a lovely day, and a most exciting, interesting one. Yesterday I was feeling rather lonely, and Gerald was very kind when he came home in the evening, and said how sorry he was not to be able to go about with me. And he reminded me that I should have my cousin to-day, and hoped we should have what the Americans call "a good time."

He has some very important work on hand now, so that he has only time to dine and to sit with me in the drawing-room for half an hour while he has a cup of coffee and a cigarette, and then he shuts himself up all the evening over his work. It does seem too bad that he can't be free when he leaves the office, but must bring the work home with him. I believe his father leaves it all to him, and Gerald is too much interested in it to make any complaint. But it isn't fair.

This morning I had scarcely finished my work with my birds and my flowers and Mrs. Joynes, the house-keeper, and looked through my dresses with Lindsay, before it was half-past one, and Harriet was announced.

I felt at once, as soon as I saw her, that my best efforts at looking nice would be thrown into the shade. Harriet was looking lovely. She was dressed in some sort of pink stuff, so pale that in some lights it looked white, with a big eighteenth-century hat trimmed with heaps of little white plumes and one big rose.

## THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER 19

I had thought my own dress, which was heliotrope foulard, was rather pretty, but Harriet made me look quite dowdy.

On the other hand, she looked rather dismayed, and said she ought to have arranged better about colors; she was afraid my dress would "kill" hers.

I laughed at her.

"Yours is not likely to be killed by anybody's, Harriet," I said. "In the papers your dresses are always mentioned. 'Lady Usher looked lovely in pale blue.' 'Among the most beautiful costumes was that of Lady Usher.' It makes me quite jealous!"

Harriet laughed, and then she sighed.

"I confess I do take an interest in dress," she said. "But one must have something, you know! And it's not as if I had married the man of my choice, as you've been able to do!"

I knew that Harriet had been married to Sir John Usher when she was very young, and that he was a rich tradesman who had been made a baronet for something or other connected with politics.

I was very sorry for her, for there was about her a strange, interesting look, as if she were haunted and secretly unhappy, in spite of her having so much that makes life pleasant. I remembered one thing which ought, I thought, to make up for a great deal.

"Well, at least you have your two children, haven't you?" I said.

She sighed again and shook her head.

"I don't feel as if they were mine at all," she said. "They are educated on a 'system,' and I scarcely see anything of them, so I always feel that they are his children, and not mine."

"That's very hard," I said.

Harriet looked down. It was a habit of hers to

## 20 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

drop her eyelids, and she looked very beautiful like that, with the long black lashes lying on her cheeks.

"I don't want to grumble, dear," she said softly. "I have a great many of the things that go to make life happy, but there's one thing wanting. You, after your unhappy first marriage, know what that is. Children are all very well, but they don't make up for the lack of the one thing. I dare say other people would call me dreadfully sentimental. Sir John would, I know, and he would sneer at me, if he were to hear me say so. But you will keep my confidence, and I tell you there is only one thing that makes life worth living, and that is love." As she uttered the word, very softly, with her eyes down, it struck me suddenly what a seductive woman she must be to men, and how very hard it must be for her to have to do without the one thing she knew how to value. "In my position," she added, with another soft little sigh, "one *can't* love, and one *mustn't* love. And life is very empty without that one thing."

I drew nearer to her, with the tears in my own eyes.

"Is Sir John unkind to you, or — unfaithful?" I said, dropping my voice to a whisper.

She shook her head wearily.

"He is not unkind," she said, "in the way that the world reckons unkindness. He lets me do as I like, as long as I don't interfere with him and with his arrangements. As for the other thing, really I don't know one way or the other. He won't come up to town for the season, because he is so immersed in his agricultural interests — cows, sheep, pigs, turnips: his hobby is to be a farmer. And as he is very conscientious in his attention to his business too, you may imagine how much time or interest he can give

to poor *me*. I am the figurehead at his dinner-table — nothing more.”

“Oh, Harriet, I know. You feel — starved!” I said gently.

She looked up quickly with those wonderful hazel eyes of hers, and said:

“Yes. That’s it exactly.”

“And you can’t feel any interest in the things he likes?”

“How can I? I do go round the farms, and try to look as if I liked it. But emphatically I don’t. I like polo, not plowing; and tennis interests me more than turnip-cutting. As for his business, I do go up to the shops sometimes — twenty-two of them, dear, full of the nicest things! But one can’t get excited about the number of gross of chairs that are sold in a year, now can one? Besides, he doesn’t want me to. He prefers to keep me away. So he won’t take a house in town, but motors backwards and forwards between Shire Place, in Berkshire, where we live, and — the shop. I believe he sleeps over it when he stays in town. But, of course,” she added, with a little frown and a sort of veiled look which might mean anything, “I don’t know.”

Luncheon was announced and we went into the dining-room, and an hour later we started in the new motor-car which Gerald and I chose together last week.

As we drove along Harriet became still more confidential, and said to me:

“Do you know, dear, I think it was so splendid of you to marry the man you loved, as you’ve done, in spite of everybody!”

I frowned a little. I do hate the way all my friends talk, as if I had condescended immensely in marrying

## 22 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

a man as good and as clever, and as well bred and all right in every way as Gerald.

"Why shouldn't I?" I said quickly.

She saw she had made a mistake, and she answered quickly:

"Why not indeed? That is what I said when Aunt Vi spoke of it in quite a martyr-like tone. Mr. Calstock is a gentleman, and very clever. I know something about him, for he has done business for Sir John, who can't say enough about him; says he is quite the shrewdest lawyer of the day, and bound to get on."

"He has got on," I said quietly.

"Yes, of course he has. When he married you, Cecilia, he made an excellent forward step."

And Harriet smiled at me archly, while I blushed.

"Have you met my husband, then?" I asked.

"No, never. But Sir John was talking about him only yesterday, and saying how very clever he is."

I was pleased to hear this, in one way, though I hated the sort of condescension which everybody conspires to show over my marriage. It is so absurd, when nobody saw anything wrong in marrying me to Sir Lionel, although they would have held up their hands in horror at the idea of marriage with a man of his stamp if he had not been so rich.

Money, money, money! How all our life seems to hinge upon that! I wonder if it was always so, and if good looks, and brains, and breeding, and honorable conduct were always nothing compared to a big balance at the bank!

When we reached Hurlingham, where I had never been before, we found that the polo match we had gone to see had not yet begun; but the time didn't hang heavy on our hands, for Harriet was surrounded,



almost at once, by a bevy of young men, with just one or two ladies among them.

The ladies were all like caricatures of her. When I told Gerald that to-night he laughed very much, but it is true, for all that.

They were all dressed in much the same way, and their hair and complexion and walk were all very like hers. Only in her case she had been clever enough to stop at just the right point; while they had all *gone on*. So, while her dress was tight but allowed her to walk without waggling, theirs was tighter and they — waggled. And while she had a complexion of cream, they had one of chalk. And so on.

As for the men, some of them were awfully nice.

Two of them stayed with us all the afternoon, and took us to have tea and ices and delicious little sandwiches that made me feel quite hungry. By the by, I must get over that, for it makes me feel that I'm not yet quite as grown up as one ought to be when one has been married twice! I'm sure Miss Trood would say it isn't "lady-like" to be hungry.

Lord Hugh Hawkhurst, one of the two, is really one of the handsomest men I have ever seen: tall, fair, broad-shouldered, and blue eyes. He looks just like a great big boy, only that he isn't clumsy or awkward. I liked him at once, and his simple, straightforward, easy manners.

The other man who wouldn't go away from us was Sir Arnold Banbury, a dear little fellow not as tall as I am, but full of fun, and most anxious for us to enjoy ourselves and see everything beautifully.

They were with us so constantly, and talked so much, that really I couldn't follow the match as carefully as I should have liked to do. But it was lovely

## 24 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

all the same, and when Harriet asked me if I would go with her to Ranelagh next week to see a still better match, I was delighted.

And Sir Arnold and Lord Hugh arranged to meet us there, and we sauntered back slowly towards the car when it was time to start for the return home.

I knew Harriet had to go back to Shire Place to-night, so I asked her to dine with us. But she could not stay in town so late, as she had to be home in time for dinner. She would not even let me drive her back to the station, but asked Lord Hawkhurst to get a taxicab for her, as she had to go a little out of her way to make some small purchases.

So those two walked on together a little ahead of Sir Arnold and me.

Sir Arnold, who was very nice and very amiable, asked if he might call on me to show me some old lace he had bought for his mother, which he wanted my opinion upon.

I told him I had no "day" as yet, but I said we were always in on Sunday, as my husband never got a week-end.

"Awful hard luck!" said Sir Arnold sympathetically. "And it's hard on you too, isn't it?"

"Oh, well, I've got to make the best of it. And it really doesn't matter to me, because I don't have to work hard, as he does."

"He'll have to let you take week-ends without him," suggested Sir Arnold.

"Oh, no. I shouldn't enjoy myself a bit."

"That's very sweet of you," said he, "never to enjoy yourself without your husband! It's more, I am much afraid, than the majority of wives could say."

He seemed to speak quite frankly, but I felt my-

self blushing, for I had certainly been enjoying myself this afternoon, without Gerald.

But, of course, I knew better than to blunder into any explanation.

In the meantime we had been walking very slowly, and Harriet and Lord Hugh had disappeared. I looked about me for them.

"Are you looking for Lady Usher?" asked Sir Arnold. "She's all right. You may be sure Hawk-hurst will look after her."

There was just enough significance in the way he said this for me to see more clearly when we did come up with the other two. I caught a look on Lord Hugh's face, when he met Harriet's eyes, which made me wonder what Sir John would say if he were to see them. And while we were waiting for her taxicab, and Sir Arnold was speaking to me, I distinctly heard the word "darling" uttered by Lord Hugh while he was talking to her.

I felt so uncomfortable that I am sure Sir Arnold must have noticed the change in my manner. But there was not much time for comments of any sort, for people were going away and we had to separate.

Harriet drove off by herself, with a last look at Lord Hugh and a last hand-shake for him; and he got into another taxi the moment after, while Sir Arnold put me in my car and reminded me that he should hope to see me at Ranelagh next week.

I felt rather uneasy all the way home.

Of course, I am not such a child now as not to know that a lovely woman like Harriet, married to a husband whom she does not care for, is sure to flirt with some one else. But yet I don't like to seem to help her to meet the other man!

When once those few words from Sir Arnold had

## 26 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

opened my eyes, I recognized at once the fact that Harriet and Lord Hugh were carrying on a very brisk flirtation indeed. She was very pathetic at luncheon and afterwards about the impossibility of her loving or being loved; but I am quite sure she would not tell Lord Hugh that it is impossible!

And then when I got home I had another shock.

At dinner I told Gerald all about the afternoon, and the polo, and about the people I had met. When I came to the name of Lord Hugh Hawkhurst he looked across at me and frowned slightly.

"That sweep!" he said shortly.

I was taken aback.

"Do you know him? And don't you like him?" I asked.

"I don't know him personally, but I know all about him. Everybody does," said he.

I was astounded.

"Isn't he all right, then?" I asked, rather alarmed about Harriet.

"He's more decidedly all wrong than almost any man I know of," my husband said shortly. "He's been co-respondent in a particularly scandalous divorce suit, for one thing. And there are other things against him too. I hope Lady Usher is not going to introduce people of that sort to you."

"I scarcely said ten words to him," I answered.

This was quite true, for, indeed, Lord Hugh had devoted himself chiefly to Harriet. But I felt uneasily that, although I was telling the exact truth, I was suppressing something which would have made my husband take a very serious view of my intercourse with Harriet.

For a little while I went on eating, without saying anything more.

I was thinking the thing out. I was very sorry

for Harriet, and I could make allowance for her, as a man can't do. I know what it is to be married to a man one can't care for, and, remembering the very, very narrow escape I had myself from the same sort of danger that now appears to threaten her, I felt my whole heart go out to her in her loneliness and her peril.

I asked myself whether I might dare to say more to Gerald on the subject, but, reflecting that he had done business for Sir John Usher, Harriet's husband, I decided that it would be a breach of faith on my part for me to say any more. I made up my mind, however, that I would warn Harriet of her danger on the first opportunity.

Presently I found Gerald looking at me gravely and I thought rather curiously through his glasses.

"And who were the other people you met to-day?" he asked.

"Oh, some of them I don't remember the names of. But there was one other man whom I talked a great deal to. I wonder whether he is a dreadful person too! His name is Banbury, Sir Arnold Banbury. Do you know anything about him?"

My husband shook his head.

"He has managed to keep out of the courts so far, at least," he said, with what seemed to me rather grim humor. "And what is he like?"

"Oh, he is a dear, merry little man, quite young, I should think, and rather short and small, but very nice. However, you needn't be jealous."

Gerald smiled.

"It wouldn't do for me to be jealous," he said. "I should make myself so very, very disagreeable."

"I believe you would, Gerald," I said, as we got up and he put his arm round me as we stood at the door. "And so, if you don't want to be jealous, you

must always be nice to me, and not treat me as Sir John Usher treats poor Harriet."

He held me away from him, and looked down at me in surprise.

"Does she complain of him?" he asked shortly.

"Oh, no. But one knows that they are not very well suited to each other. She married him when she was only just out, and he is a tradesman, with his mind in his business and his heart in his short-horns and sheep."

"He is a very decent fellow," said he shortly. "And I can't think that a woman would have much to complain of with him."

"Harriet doesn't complain," I said quickly.

"She flirts, apparently," said my husband.

I felt my eyelids quivering. Gerald is too clever to be easily misled. I don't think I wanted to deceive him about Harriet, but I certainly did not want him to know that she was flirting with Lord Hugh. It seems to me it would be like a betrayal.

"You know, Gerald," I said gently, "that a very pretty woman, like my cousin, must always attract admiration. That's not her fault, is it?"

He smiled down at me kindly, and took me by the elbow.

"I don't say that it is," he said. "But look here. Take the first opportunity you get of quickly advising your cousin not to have anything to do with Lord Hugh Hawkhurst. He's not a man to be trusted by any woman."

I looked up, puzzled.

"Are you sure, Gerald?" I asked. "Lord Hugh doesn't *look* like that sort of man!"

"No," said my husband dryly. "*They never do.*"

I said no more about it, and I shall certainly give Harriet a very strong warning indeed.

*June 9th.*

I AM afraid I made rather a mess of it yesterday, when I saw Harriet again. She came early, looking radiantly pretty, as usual, and not a bit like the mother of two children who must be eight and nine years old by this time.

I had scarcely kissed her before she held me away and said:

"Well, did you get my letter?"

I laughed.

"If you call that a letter, I did," I said, as I took out of my bag the scrawl of about ten words which I had got by the first post in the morning.

"My dear child, you mustn't mind. I really have no time to write long letters. It is as much as I can do to scribble half a dozen words on a postcard. You ought to consider yourself honored by getting a communication from me in an envelope."

"Well, I'm glad you've come, at any rate."

"Really?"

"Yes, indeed. You know I hate London. It's so dreary to go about all by oneself."

"Why don't you go about with Aunt Vi?"

"Mamma! Oh, so I do. But, of course, she can't come always."

I couldn't tell her that Gerald doesn't approve of my seeing too much of mamma, because, as he says, she leads me into extravagance. He doesn't forbid it, but his mouth takes that curious straight look when she goes out with me more than once a week.

## 30 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

Of course, I could if I liked, and so I should if I hadn't always that uncomfortable feeling, when I am with mamma, that she is unhappy because she has so many bills to pay, and that whatever one does for her is always less than she thinks one ought to do.

But I have put all my affairs into Gerald's hands, and though I do help her as much as ever I can, and always pretend the money has gone on things for myself, he guesses and is displeased, and that makes me miserable and ashamed, for mamma and myself too!

Harriet asked me how I enjoyed myself at Hurlingham, and I told her it was splendid, and what Jack used to call "ripping."

She laughed.

"Poor old Jack!" she said. "Have you heard that he's going to be married to a rich widow? Soap, or something of that sort, I think. It's really dreadful what things one has got to marry into nowadays! I into chairs and tables, and you into money-lending, and now poor old Jack! I used to think, you know, Cis, that you would have married Jack as soon as you were free!"

I shook my head. A little while ago the mention of his name would still have been painful to me, but now I am happily married I don't mind.

"I'm very glad I didn't," I said quietly.

She looked at me carefully from under those long eyelashes of hers as she leaned back in her chair.

"He always used to talk as if he was really fond of you," she said. "And he is quite a dear!"

"Oh, yes, I used to like him very much. But you know, Harriet, one can't go on liking a person when one has found out that that person is not to be trusted."



She nodded her head appreciatively.

"Of course not. The very essence of love is — discretion," she said.

I grew red. I had not meant that. Jack had been rather too discreet. I suddenly remembered the caution I had to give her about Lord Hugh. This seemed, I thought, a favorable moment for making an allusion to it. But it was wonderful how much harder it was to utter a warning of that sort than I had thought it would be. However, after what Gerald had said about Lord Hugh, it had to be done.

"It's not a matter of discretion," I said, speaking rather hurriedly and breathing very fast. "Discretion means just hiding things. But one can't love a person without reserve unless one feels that person to be honorable and — well, in fact, worth loving. Can one?"

Harriet's eyes seemed to close up till they were just two slits. But she could see out of them quite well.

"I really don't know," she said. "Perhaps you and I don't mean quite the same thing by the word love."

"I'm sure we don't," I said quickly. "With me it must be — everything."

Harriet bent slowly forward, and then drooped her head.

"Lucky girl!" she said softly.

She was gentle, not indignant, as I had thought perhaps she might be. For, after all, I am a good deal younger than she is, and she could see that I was "preaching." I slid down on my knees beside her.

"Harriet," I whispered quickly, "I want to say something to you. Don't be angry with me, but I

## 32 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

must say it. I couldn't help seeing something at Hurlingham the other day —"

She started slightly.

"What do you mean?"

I hurried on:

"That Lord Hugh Hawkhurst is trying to flirt with you."

A sort of spasm seemed to make her mouth twitch, then she sat very still.

"What makes you think so?" she asked.

"Why, I—I heard him call you 'darling.' I couldn't help it. And—oh, Harriet, I saw the look you gave him, as well as the look he gave you!"

She laughed softly.

"Well, what of that, child? You are too absurd! How do you measure looks?" she said.

Still, she was not cross, so I slid my hand into hers, and went on:

"Look here, of course I know it does sound like impertinence for me to talk to you like this. But I have to, because of something I've heard."

"What's that?" asked Harriet, speaking quickly for the first time.

"Well, it's about Lord Hugh. I've been told such dreadful things about him, Harriet. They say—though I admit it's hard to believe it when he's so nice, but I've been told he is really quite a dreadful person, that he's altogether dishonorable and unprincipled."

She was breathing rather quickly, but for a moment she just played with her long chain. Then she said lazily:

"Aunt Vi told you that, I suppose?" I didn't answer, and she went on: "And, of course, it was she who told you to tell me this stuff. Well, it's all non-

sense. I've known Hugh for ever so long. And he's the most absolutely reliable man I've ever met."

"Of course, you think so. But really it comes to this, that I can't go to Ranelagh with you on Saturday if you are going to meet him there."

Harriet's hands suddenly fell down at her sides, and her face became quite white. I was sorry and ashamed, and I clung to her, and begged her not to be angry with me. For a few minutes she did not move, did not even seem to notice my hands holding her. She stared out before her with the same fixed look, her cheeks pale, her mouth trembling, breathing heavily.

Then she threw me off and burst into tears.

I sat back on a cushion and watched her, wondering whether I had done good or harm.

At last she dashed away her tears and sprang up. Instinctively she made straight for the nearest mirror, a little oval one which stood on a side-table, and, stooping down before it, she dried her eyes very carefully, and rearranged her hair and her hat.

"Harriet," I said in a silly, meek little voice, like a schoolgirl's, "what are you going to do?"

She turned upon me. But it was characteristic of her that, although her great gray-green eyes were burning, and her face still livid and drawn, she did not raise her voice, she did not move quickly. She only said, drawing deep breaths between every two or three words:

"What am I going to do? I'm going away. I can't stay with you, Cecilia, to be insulted. I'm quite sure you have been persuaded by your mother to speak to me like this, and that you are doing it because she told you to. But really I think it is more than ought to be expected of me, to submit to be lec-

## 34 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

tured as to my conduct by a child scarcely nineteen."

I was going to protest. It seemed to me that when one has been married twice one ought to be considered quite out of one's childhood, no matter how young one is. But she seemed to guess what I was going to say, and she stopped me.

"Yes, I know you have been a wife, and then a widow, and that now you are a wife again. But now that you are happily married, you forget what you felt when you were the wife of Sir Lionel Eberhard."

"Oh, no, I don't. I don't indeed, and that's why I am so sorry for you."

"Sorry for me, are you?" She sprang at me, in that lithe, graceful way of hers, which always reminds me of some sort of handsome wild animal, and then she took my hands in hers and, recovering herself a little, said:

"I dare say it's all true, Cis. I dare say you and Aunt Vi know more than I do about Lord Hugh. But just consider my position! I have no friend whom I can confide in — at least, I had none till you came back. I don't want more than one friend, and I don't care whether that one is man or woman. Now you are here I can do without any other confidant. But till you came, I did want some one, and — and so it came about that I flirted a little — perhaps, with poor dear Hugh. However, there's an end of it now. As long as you'll go about with me, and let me come up and see you and tell you all my troubles, I shan't want any more sympathy from anybody."

She kissed me so affectionately that I was quite touched, though it seemed rather a sudden sort of conversion.

However, I hope it is genuine, for it's very nice to have her with me, although we don't see things always in the same way.

We had a lovely day's shopping this afternoon, and then she got into a taxi to drive to Paddington.

Just as she got into it she asked me to write her a letter that she could show to Sir John, to let him see that she had been spending the day with me.

I looked astonished, and she laughed and said:

"It's all Aunt Vi's fault. She's been saying the unkindest things. And Sir John is very disagreeable about it. But when he knows I've been with you he will be satisfied. You won't forget?"

"All right," I said.

I thought it a little odd, but, on the other hand, I was glad that she could find the distraction she wanted in such an innocent way as shopping with me.

But when I was driving home, after leaving a little parcel for poor old Miss Trood at her lodgings in Gower Street, I came through Piccadilly. There was a cab stopping at the door of Prince's Restaurant, and I am almost sure that I recognized Lord Hugh Hawkhurst getting out of it.

But I do wish the lady he was handing out hadn't been wearing a hat so like the one Harriet wore this afternoon!

CURZON STREET,

*June 14th.*

POOR Gerald has had to go to bed with a bad headache, and what looks terribly like a touch of influenza! So I am writing this quietly in my boudoir now that he has gone off to sleep, and I am feeling a guilty wretch!

And yet it certainly wasn't my fault.

When I got Harriet's letter yesterday reminding me of the Ranelagh appointment, I read it aloud to Gerald, and he nodded and said he hoped I should have a good time.

So he evidently did not think there would be any harm in my going, and I was very glad, for I enjoyed myself very much at Hurlingham, and the match to-day was expected to be an exciting one.

I was hoping against hope that Lord Hugh would not be there, or, at least, that he would not devote himself to Harriet as he had done before. But things turned out very differently from what I had imagined.

We met him and Sir Arnold almost as soon as we got to the club, but it was Sir Arnold who talked to Harriet, and Lord Hugh to me!

I was very glad indeed, as it seemed to me to dispose of the rumors and of my doubts about him and Harriet.

On the other hand, I felt rather uncomfortable, wondering what Gerald would say if he were to hear

that I had talked so much to a man of whom he disapproved.

However, he certainly could not have objected to anything Lord Hugh said to me, and he certainly is one of the nicest, as well as one of the handsomest, men I have ever met.

Every now and then he would catch Harriet's eye, and there would be a sort of silent message exchanged between the two. But the two scarcely exchanged more than a dozen words until quite the end of the day, when she snapped at him so decidedly as he helped her into the car with me that I could not help thinking it was more like the manner of a wife to a husband than of a lady to an acquaintance.

I wish I could tell Gerald all about it. Of course, there is really nothing much to tell; but I have a sort of feeling that I am on ground that I don't know the nature of, and that I should be glad of some one's arm to lean on to help me over it.

On the other hand, Gerald's way of disposing of difficulties is so very short and sharp that I am afraid, if I were to say all the things I should have to say, trifling as they are, he would forbid me to have Harriet here again, or, at least, that he would think things of her which I am sure are not true. And he is too ill to be troubled to-night.

And I am sorry for her, very sorry. Now that I am happy myself I can feel so much for women who are going through the purgatory I went through before!

CURZON STREET,

*June 16th.*

THANK Heaven, my dear Gerald is better, and thinks it is not the "flu" after all, but only an ordinary cold. I wish he didn't look so pale and worn, and that old Mr. Calstock would find out some way of relieving him of the pressure of overwork.

Mamma came to luncheon to-day, all feathery lightness and fluttering high spirits, as usual. I had no idea that she had anything on her mind, for she rattled away about her visit to her dressmaker, and about the dinner she was at last night, and a hundred other things, and it was not till she was going away, after we had had tea together in my boudoir, that she suddenly stopped half-way to the door to say:

"By the way, Cis, I hope you won't let that impossible Lord Hugh Hawkhurst flirt with you, dear! Really, I'm not censorious, as you know, but he really is quite *too* dreadful!"

I was amazed. I hadn't even mentioned him to her.

"I've only met him twice," I said.

She turned to give me a glance over her shoulder.

"Oh, yes, with Harriet, I suppose?"

"Yes. And if you want to warn anybody about him, you had better warn *her*," I said, rather nettled.

"It is she who flirts with him, not I."

Mamma laughed, and shrugged her shoulders in that pretty French way she has.

"My dear Cis," she said, "Harriet can take care of herself. What she does is her own affair. But



she has no right to make use of you in the way she's doing."

"To make use of me!" I echoed, aghast.

Mamma nodded.

"Yes. Sir John has heard rumors; whether he knows who it is I don't know, but he is certainly inclined to be angry about her conduct. If he should find out anything, there would be a scandal. These tradesmen love an advertisement, and they don't care how they get it. The differences which *we* should keep to ourselves, which we *do* keep to ourselves, they must always make haste to drag into the law courts."

I was greatly shocked.

"I'm sure there can't be anything wrong," I said. "If Sir John is so jealous, why doesn't he try harder to please his wife?"

"Oh, well, Harriet is not the sort of woman whom it's easy to please — for long together," mamma said. "I suppose she and Lord Hugh get on together much better than she and Sir John do, and it's a great pity he can't leave her to do as she likes. But these men who have made money and then married women belonging to a class above them can never understand that there must be something in old associations."

It seemed strange to hear mamma talking like that, after the lectures she used to treat me to about my duty to Sir Lionel!

She trotted off after that, without letting me have time to ask the questions I wanted answered.

But I've quite made up my mind that I won't be made use of again by Harriet, to help her to deceive her husband and to see Lord Hugh without his knowing anything about it!

CURZON STREET,

*June 30th.*

WHAT a long, dull time it seems since I had anything to write in my diary! Day after day has been just the same for a fortnight. Gerald is better, that is one good thing. But he has to take great care of himself, and I have grown quite clever in persuading him to leave off work at twelve instead of one, so that he can get a longer night's rest.

Mamma I have seen twice, and Gerald's people once. I suppose his mother is really all right, only she is fearfully prim, with a sort of primness I have never seen before. She glares at me as if she disapproved of me, and is very stiff. The old gentleman I rather like, because, I suppose, I can see that he likes me.

But that evening when they are to come to dinner with papa and mamma and us will be a funny entertainment!

I have refused all Harriet's invitations, and she hasn't been once to see me since Ranelagh. I suppose she hasn't dared!

And all the time I feel rather wicked, as if I had condemned her unheard. For mamma isn't always quite to be trusted in what she says, and perhaps I am doing poor Harriet injustice after all.

To-day Lady Langbourne called upon me, and invited me to her house at Cowes for the end of July and the beginning of August, to include the Cowes week. She said it was Harriet who asked her to get

me to come, as she is going too. I felt so self-reproachful!

I said I must ask Gerald if I could come, but that I should love it.

And to-night Gerald told me to accept, and I have written.

I wonder whether Harriet will be there, and, if so, what she will say to me!

COWES,

*July 15th.*

WHAT a heavenly day! And what a sweet old house! And how delightful everything has been except having to say good-by to poor Gerald, and to leave him grinding away in town while I am enjoying myself!

I found Harriet here among lots of other people, and she kissed me effusively, and said how delighted she was to see me again. Not a word of reproach for my not having accepted any of her invitations to go shopping with her, and to polo matches and the theater!

It is rather odd, but as I was dreading what she might have to say, and how she might look, I am thankful that all has passed off so well.

This is quite the sweetest old house I ever stayed in, nicer even than my dear old Fouroaks, which always looks as if more money ought to be spent on it to keep it in proper repair.

I have got a lovely room, a long way up, but with a view of the water and the yachts which is well worth a climb.

Lady Langbourne made ever so many apologies for putting me on the second floor, but Princess Adèle and the Duchess of Newport are both here, and with the other guests there is pressure upon such a house as this, which was never meant to accommodate a lot of people.

A long corridor runs from end to end of the house, and at right angles to it at each end is another corridor, which goes the length of each wing.

Harriet's room is a little further down, on the opposite side, with an outlook over the garden, which is poor compared to mine. I like the big lawn in front between the house and the road; it is better than just the sea, for the soft green between is restful to the eyes. It was lovely to sit there after dinner in the twilight, but a little embarrassing when the trippers, who swarm here already, would persist in stopping, in flocks, to stare at us through the railings, as if we were wild animals waiting to be fed with buns on sticks!

Lady Langbourne says she is quite used, by this time, to comments upon her personal appearance which are the reverse of flattering! She says, when she hears the words "the old girl," she always tries to be deaf!

I don't know, by the bye, how any one can say unflattering things about her, for she really is a very pretty old lady, and would look better still if only she didn't wear such an obvious wig! I wonder if her hair was really that flaxen color when she was young! It looks like a baby's!

There are some very odd people here, and some very nice ones.

Princess Adèle is quite nice, only so deaf that conversation with her is carried on chiefly in pantomime. She speaks a mixture of French, English, and German, and some of the things she says are very startling indeed, only as she never seems to know that she is saying anything surprising we all have to appear unmoved.

The Duchess of Newport talks more slang than anybody I ever heard. But she is a jolly old thing, and I like her.

Letty Langbourne, Lady Langbourne's daughter-in-

## 44 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

law, is the most audacious person I ever met. She doesn't care what she says or what she does, and she will put on overalls and climb out on the jib-boom of her yacht to do anything that has to be done.

She says she has the advantage over pretty women that she never need care how she looks, as she can't look anything but ugly. That isn't quite true, but she has little light eyes and large ears that stand out, and a quantity of short, fluffy, fair hair. She is never here unless her husband, Geoffrey Langbourne, is away.

Harriet says she has had more men in love with her than any pretty woman in England, and she says if she hadn't been a lady she would have had a very adventurous career indeed. Only Harriet doesn't put it like that, but makes it sound rather shocking.

I wish she hadn't said that to me, because I should like to like Letty Langbourne; she is so merry, and enjoys life so much.

I can see Lady Langbourne doesn't like her, and when I asked Harriet why, she told me it was because Lady Langbourne meant her son Geoffrey to marry some one else, and that Letty's being here keeps Geoffrey away.

It does seem difficult to understand, when everybody else likes her so much!

COWES,

*July 16th.*

I HAVE had a horrid, worrying day. Sitting here in my room at night, with the window open, and the lovely cool breeze coming in from the sea, I feel a little calmer and easier, but I have been terribly vexed to-day.

We began beautifully, for Letty Langbourne and I and one or two of the men went out in her yacht and had a lovely sail. I don't think I should care to trust myself with Letty if there were a stiff breeze blowing, for I think her seamanship, that she is so proud of, is not much like the real thing. I think these fine ladies — that's what I must call them — are rather superficial, for one of the men told me that the Duchess of Newport, who talks the slang of the stable-yard as fluently as any groom, only just knows one end of a horse from the other.

But perhaps it isn't true!

It's very amusing to hear these little bits of gossip about the other women, as I do all day long; but I wonder what the gossip is that they exchange about me!

When we got back to luncheon I had a most horrid shock. For as we came up the garden through the gate at the side among the shrubs, the first two people I caught sight of were Harriet — and Lord Hugh! They were sitting under an umbrella-tent on the lawn, talking very earnestly. Harriet looks nicer than ever in her plain navy serge, with a gorgeous red and gold

and green-embroidered waistcoat and a Liberty silk scarf wound several times round her neck and tied in a bow, instead of a collar.

That is characteristic of Harriet: she would look horrid in a plain white, hard collar such as Letty Langbourne and the Duchess wear, and yet she can contrive to devise something that doesn't look a bit too fanciful, while it suits her perfectly.

Lord Hugh looks better than ever in his yachting things, and Letty Langbourne, who was walking with me when we caught sight of him, remarked upon it at once.

"What a good-looking fellow Hugh Hawkhurst is!" she said. "I don't wonder how all the women run after him!"

I was looking shocked still.

"Yes, I suppose he is good-looking," I said grudgingly.

She laughed.

"I can see you don't like him," she said.

"I wonder Lady Langbourne invites him," I said.

Letty shrugged her shoulders. By the bye, I have already begun to call her "Letty," as if I had known her a long time. But everybody does here, and she hates being called anything else.

"Lady Langbourne has to ask him," she said, "or else Harriet Usher wouldn't come, of course."

I said "Oh!" with a sort of gasp, and Letty laughed again.

"You are a prim little creature," she said, "considering —"

She stopped short, and I have been wondering ever since what it was that she was going to say. Generally she says anything that comes into her head.

"I shouldn't have thought," I said, when we had



walked a few steps without speaking, "that Lady Langbourne would have invited a married woman and man who was flirting with her."

Letty roared with laughter.

"Oh, really, Lady Cecilia, you are quite too funny!" she said. "Do you really mean that, or is it part of the 'Sweet Simplicity' pose that makes the men say you are irresistible?"

I felt very uncomfortable, and I could have cried with vexation. Letty saw that I was really vexed, and she tucked her hand into my arm and said:

"My dear child, I'm sorry if I've hurt your feelings. But really I can't help laughing at your innocence. How could one get people together if one didn't invite those who wanted to see each other?"

"But they ought not to want to see each other," I began, and then, as she evidently had hard work to keep from laughing again, I saw that I was making myself ridiculous in her eyes. But I didn't care. I went on. "Look here," I said, "although I know it seems silly to you to say so, I really don't see that there was anything ridiculous in what I said. Some men don't like their wives to flirt."

"Why, of course. If they didn't mind, where would be the fun?"

I said nothing. Letty drew me coaxingly to her, and patted my hand patronizingly as she walked on with me, obliging me to keep pace with her.

"Where's the harm of liking one man better than the rest, if you have the sense to know when to stop?"

"But you can't be sure of knowing that."

"Oh, well, if you don't, then you're a fool, and one needn't waste one's pity upon you."

I shook my head.

"It seems to me," I said, "that one's pity ought to

## 48 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

be given to those who are in earnest, and that those are just the people it's not wasted upon. If your feelings are so weak and so trivial that you can turn off the tap when you like, then you're not worth much pity whatever happens. But if there's something more in you than that, and if you find you can't leave off caring, why then I should say you're worth being sorry for."

"Oh, well, at least, if you're so deadly in earnest, you have your fun, and you must be prepared to pay for it, I suppose."

"Yes, but I shouldn't like to help anybody I was interested in to get to that stage," I said. "And I shouldn't have thought Lady Langbourne would."

Letty laughed mischievously.

"Well, Lady Langbourne has had plenty of experience," she said.

"What!" I said, rather shocked at what her tone implied. Letty nodded.

"She's very nice now, but she was decidedly naughty in her time, and even now we are all careful not to mention a certain hotel in Rome when she is present; that is, unless we want to rub her up the wrong way."

I tried not to look as if I did not believe her, and said nothing to this. But I do wish, whether it is true or not, that she had not told me about it. One can't help seeing that, whatever they may profess to think, there is a great deal of danger in this easy-going way of life, and that there is an undercurrent to it all which makes it really quite different from what it looks on the surface.

I know the women here think me a little prig; indeed, Letty told me I was one this evening to my face. But I really don't see how one could be much with these people without being either a prig or — well, the

sort of person that causes other persons to become prigs.

When Lord Hugh caught sight of me he said something to Harriet, and they both came up to me at the same time, and talked so fast that I couldn't get a word in edgeways.

And she left Lord Hugh with me, and we strolled about the garden until it was time to go in for luncheon. Then Harriet told me quite simply that she should get jealous if I monopolized him as I was doing.

I suppose I looked rather scandalized, for I saw old Lady Langbourne looking at me in a rather odd way, and this evening she took me in hand and lectured me, actually lectured me, with the best possible intentions, I am sure, on my way of looking at things.

It was after dinner, and Lord Hugh had sat by Harriet and devoted himself to her quite openly, and when we went into the saloon Lady Langbourne put her arm within mine and smiled at me, and then asked me to go with her into the garden, as she had not got her stick to lean on.

She was very nice, but I had an idea in my head that I was in for some sort of sermon.

"Do you know, my dear," she said presently, when we had got half-way down the garden, and could see the lights twinkling from the shore on the other side of the Solent, "that I am very sorry for you?"

"That's very kind of you," I said, and I could not help smiling. "But I don't know why you should be — now."

"Don't you? Well, I pity any woman who marries out of her own proper milieu, as you have done."

"Oh, yes, when I married Sir Lionel Eberhard, you mean?"

"No, no, I don't. That was a very good marriage, from our point of view. Of course, he was a quite impossible person, but then, it was bound to end all right. And after all, even if you had had to put up with him for a few years, you had your own friends round you all the time."

I was so bewildered by this new point of view from which to regard my disastrous marriage that I had nothing to say. Lady Langbourne went on:

"But now you have married this lawyer, of course you are out of it, and we shall all have to put our shoulders to the wheel to bring you back again."

"How do you mean that I'm 'out of it,' Lady Langbourne?"

"Why, you seem to be among us but not of us, and to look as if you had been stranded. Harriet Usher told me about you, and asked me to go and see you, and I never felt so sorry for a woman before."

"Why? Do you mean that I looked unhappy?"

"Oh, no, my dear. You didn't seem to mind, or to know. That's why I felt so sorry."

"But why be sorry for me if I'm happy, and don't feel sorry for myself?"

"Because you are at the outset of life, when you have to choose your road. If you were to go on as you are doing, you would end by becoming the dull wife of a dull man, and you would be lost to society for ever."

"I don't think that would matter so much as you think it would, to me. I'm sure I was never meant to be a society woman at all."

"So you think, my dear, now. But the time will come when you will think differently, and then, unless you have made an effort in the meantime to wrench

yourself free from your environment and to go back to your own people, you will regret it bitterly, and so will your children, if you have any."

Prejudiced as I was in one way, and as, I could see, she was in another, I could not but understand that there was a great deal of truth in what she said. Whatever there might be in the way of life and in the thought of these people to jar upon me and to seem wrong and idle, I knew that, if I were to break with them and with their circle now, I should be sorry some day, and that I should feel as if I had lost something that was worth holding.

"You are sensible enough to know that I'm right," she added shrewdly.

But I was not going to let a slur be cast on my husband.

"I should be very sorry indeed to think that I should have to break with my own friends, and with all the people who have been kind to me," I said, "but I hope you will not give me up just because I am duller than most of the people you know."

"You are not dull at all, my dear, but you have been cowed, I think, and you have scarcely yet got over it."

I shook my head.

"I don't think I could ever enjoy life in the way Mrs. Geoffrey does," I said. Lady Langbourne frowned impatiently, and I went on quickly: "The truth is that I like a quiet life, and that, if only my husband could afford to live in the country, and we could have a nice place a hundred miles away from London, I should be perfectly happy with my garden and my horses. I'm very domestic, and what you would call spiritless, Lady Langbourne. As long as my husband is fond of me, and I have my flowers and

## 52 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

my plants and my animals about me, I have nothing to wish for."

"But that can't last, my dear," said the old lady. "There was a time, no doubt, when a woman could get all her happiness in her own narrow little circle. But life is different now."

"It will never be different as long as my husband cares for me," I said decidedly.

"Well, that's a poor thing to reckon upon, the love of a man, isn't it?" said she with conviction. "Even of the best man. And lawyers don't make good husbands. Either they are so immersed in business that they have no time for home, or they get on and make homes for themselves outside the family radius. And remember, you're bound to be jealous of his lady clients."

"No, no," said I. "I should never be that. I can trust him."

She laughed.

"Then let me advise you not to let him know he is so sure of you. The best way to keep the admiration of a man is not to let him know quite how much you really care for him."

And she called to Harriet, who was standing at the window, to come out and sit on the lawn.

Thinking it all over now I am by myself, I am worried and unhappy about it all. I am sure Harriet ought not to risk displeasing her husband by flirting so openly with Lord Hugh, and I know that she has used my name again, by telling Sir John that she has come here to be with me, when really it is to be with somebody else.

And it makes me uneasy and uncomfortable to know that I attract so much attention by taking things differently from the rest, as to oblige Lady Lang-

bourne to go out of her way to lecture me! Really I feel that I ought to be very much ashamed of being in love with my own husband! I think Lady Langbourne could scarcely put up with such eccentricity if she did not feel sure that I shall soon settle down to flirting with somebody else!

COWES,

*July 17th.*

I DON'T know what to do! I feel as if I had been suddenly plunged into all the old misery and horror and disgust of the worst time at Monte Carlo, when Sir Lionel was alive.

And yet this time it is really nothing to do with me.

But I can't feel as if it did not concern me; it makes me miserable, and ashamed, and utterly wretched, and now I want to go back to town as quickly as I can. But I shall have to make up some story, and, above all, not to let any one guess why it is that I must go.

But how shall I meet Gerald? He is so dreadfully sharp-sighted that he will certainly guess something must have happened to disgust me, and he will lay little traps until he finds out, not the whole truth—for that I couldn't tell him—but enough to make mischief.

To think how little I guessed yesterday evening, when I was writing my diary for the day, what was going to happen before I made the next entry!

It was so dreadfully hot last night that I couldn't sleep, and I thought I would go along the corridor to Harriet's room, and ask for some of her toilet vinegar, as I have none. It was nearly half-past one, but I know she sits up reading till two or three when it is as suffocating as it was last night, and I guessed



she would not be asleep. So I opened my door very softly.

I don't know exactly what possessed me, but I was dreadfully restless. Everybody else had appeared thoroughly tired out, and most of them had gone off to bed rather earlier than usual. Somehow I seemed to want to have a long, quiet talk all alone with Harriet. I thought of so many things that I could say to her, and above all, I had worked myself up into a firm belief that at the worst she must surely be open to reason? Was she not really very well married, had she not children? Then I thought how I would endeavor to touch the maternal feeling in her, for I felt certain that she was not really so heartless as she tried to make herself out to be. Oh, I thought in my overweening conceit, what a splendid thing it would be if only I could reason her out of her follies, and then I meant to show her how terrible it would be if those follies should ultimately lead her into something very dreadful. To my mind her infatuation for Lord Hugh appeared almost grotesque, now I reflected on it in solitude all alone and away from all the distractions of the House Party. For the first time I saw clearly how bad was the influence upon a woman like Harriet of the *abandon* of such utterly frivolous pursuits as those that made up the sum of the days in this house devoted to the most childish amusements, and really the very atmosphere exhaled by most of the guests appeared to me simply provocative of that very normal relaxation which is, as we all know, the beginning of mischief to those who have but little power of self-restraint, and decidedly Harriet was miles away from me in that respect. Had she not often told me how absurdly scrupulous I was? Had she not said, "You silly child, you really ought to be

a Roman Catholic, confession would suit you so well! I believe you would quite enjoy pretending all kinds of wickedness just to have a nice fatherly priest lay his hand on your head and absolve you?" And then she would go into quite a fit of laughter. Harriet was very fond of making fun of me. But to return to my narrative. I went very softly to Harriet's door, and was surprised to find it ajar. That astonished me. I peeped in and saw a light burning there feebly, and found the room empty. That discovery made me feel very sick. What did it mean? I stole out again, and then such a heat came over me that I went down the broad stairs for the sake of the coolness that came up from below. There was indeed a refreshing draught, and it all at once struck me that below there must be a door or window open. Anyway, I went down almost automatically, and, in fact, it seemed as though I were under some hypnotic influence, when I found myself at the bottom, and then I fancied I heard a whisper. Somehow the idea of thieves never entered my mind at all, and I went silently forward, for I had no shoes on, to the direction whence the whispering came, and observed that the door of the music-room was half open. A faint light shone through, and looking instinctively through the crack down the hinges I saw Harriet standing a little apart from Lord Hugh, who appeared to be urging her more with gesture than words to do something. Then he spoke in low, distinct tones, saying, "Why not end it all, why not fly with me?" And he looked, to my fancy, so ridiculous in his evident actor-like pose, that I burst into an uncontrollable hysteric laugh. I really could not help it, and then, terrified at having thus betrayed my presence, I fled, hearing a scrambling behind me; and just as I gained

my own door, I looked round and saw Harriet rush into her room and heard her lock the door very audibly.

Then, when once more safely in my own room, I felt, oh, so grieved that Harriet should have a clandestine meeting with Lord Hugh, and let him flirt with her in that silly, melodramatic manner, and under circumstances, too, that would look so very terrible if only anybody besides myself had come upon them while they were philandering like that, after everybody else had gone to bed!

CURZON STREET,

*July 19th.*

WELL, a dreadful day is over!

Yesterday morning I was still at Cowes, at Lady Langbourne's, and now I am back here, with another ordeal before me to-night, to which even that of yesterday is nothing. I am afraid.

I got down late to breakfast yesterday, and was lucky in not meeting Harriet. But Lord H—— H—— was there, quite amiable and happy, and handsome as usual, and most anxious to get me toast and eggs and fish and all I wanted.

I wanted to kill him, but instead I contrived to smile and to thank him and to talk about the weather. It does seem strange what a lot of small talk has to be got through when tragedies are going on! There was my usual letter from Gerald on the table, just a few lines written as soon as he got home from the office. He said he was still very seedy, and I made up my mind at once to make that the excuse for going home at once.

Lady Langbourne never appears at breakfast. Harriet says her complexion is never ready before one o'clock. But I told Letty I thought I should have to go home that day, as my husband was not well and might want me.

"What a reason, my dear!" she lisped out in her merry whisper, as we walked away from the breakfast-table together. "When Geoffrey isn't well I al-

ways find an excuse to be in another hemisphere. A man is always so dreadfully cross when there's anything the matter with him."

"There might be more the matter with him if I didn't go home," I said. "I'm sure he doesn't take enough care of himself."

Letty laughed.

"You do amuse me, child," she said, "with your lovely Rushbury face and your funny middle-class ideals!"

I felt myself growing very red. To begin with, it was provoking as well as amusing to hear Letty talk about the middle-class in that sneering way, considering that her grandfather was a hatter in the City, who made money in the South African boom and then got knighted!

And in the second place, it always makes me angry to hear people talk as if it were only the middle-class who led orderly lives.

"Do you think it's only in what you call the middle-class that husbands and wives care for each other?" I asked her.

"Oh, no, dear, of course not. One hears stories about rich tradesmen and stock-brokers, and one sees their names associated with scandal. But devotion like yours would be conspicuous anywhere."

I was nettled, so I retorted:

"Well, I think indifference like yours is just as exceptional. And I'm sure I hope it is. I don't see anything to envy in the state of mind that makes one able to get on with any man unless he's had the misfortune to marry one."

I hope I am not generally ill-natured, but really I was so disgusted with what I had seen the night before, and with the general tone of the place that made

## 60 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

such scandals possible, that I spoke more waspishly than I usually do.

Letty raised her eyebrows. But she remained perfectly good-tempered.

"Ah, my dear," she said. "You're new to the business, and at present you're only in the billing and cooing stage. When you come here next year you will have settled down, and we shall have to look after our best boys."

Letty says things that make one curl up, sometimes, as this did. I tried to laugh, to ward off another attack upon the unhappy middle-class, and then I said I would send off a wire to tell Gerald I was coming back.

This was an opportunity Letty could not resist.

"A wire! I'm glad to see you have just enough discretion to let him know you're coming!" she said.

At which sally I had to laugh with the best grace I could. It is not that I have any fear that Gerald will ever be anything but the old dear he is to me now, but I hate to hear it taken for granted by everybody that some day he will be different, and that I shall be *indifferent*!

I wonder what makes men marry these women at all! If they have stayed in many houses like this, where everybody thinks only of enjoying each day as it comes, I should have thought they would have seen enough to warn them off!

As for the women, I see why they marry: Letty, for instance, has got into society with Grandpapa Hatter's African money; but why did Geoffrey Langbourne marry her? It certainly can't have been in order to enjoy her society; for apparently he is the only man she knows who does not.

Lady Langbourne was very kind when she heard

I had to return to town; and Harriet, whom I saw for the first time at luncheon, asked me across the table whether I couldn't wait till the end of the week, and go back with her.

I answered as naturally as I could that it was impossible; but I saw a sort of alarm upon her face when I spoke, which made me wonder whether she had any suspicion that I had heard or seen anything.

Lady Langbourne said it was a thousand pities I was going, as Sir Arnold Banbury, who was an enthusiastic admirer of mine, was coming over in his yacht, the *Lucette*.

Sir Arnold arrived before luncheon was over, expressed the greatest distress on learning that I was going away, and insisted on taking me across to Southsea in his yacht to catch the four-fifty train, by which I was going back to town.

"Mind, you have it in your own hands whether she catches the train or not, Banbury," said Lord Hugh.

But I said that, if I were to lose the train, Sir Arnold would never forget it, and he affected to turn pale with terror at the thought of my anger.

I had made up my mind not to say good-by to Harriet, for, as I knew that she doesn't care two straws about anything I can say, I thought that the best thing would be to frighten her by saying nothing at all. Besides, I really was so intensely disgusted and ashamed of her that I knew I couldn't speak to her as if nothing had happened.

I contrived to avoid her, and I think she knew that I did. But she did not, as I expected, try to see me in my room, and I got away with Letty Langbourne and two or three of the others, in good time to catch the train.

We all went on board the *Lucette* together, and the sail across to Portsmouth was lovely. I was wondering as we went what had become of Harriet, for it seemed odd that she should not have contrived at least to see me for a few moments, if only to find out why I was cutting her so carefully.

We sailed up to the harbor pier, where they landed me, Sir Arnold insisting that he must accompany me to the station to see me off.

But we had only gone a few steps when Harriet, appearing from I don't know where, came up to us, and, thrusting her hand through my arm, told Sir Arnold that she wanted to see me off herself, as she had a message for me to take to my mother. She was wearing a dark dress and a lace veil so thick that I did not know who she was till I felt her touch my arm, and heard her speak.

Sir Arnold was very unwilling to give me up to her, and so was I to be given up. But Harriet was so persistent, so quiet, and so determined, that she had to have her way, and I said good-by to Sir Arnold and walked up the pier with her.

"Are you going up to town with me?" I said.

"No," she said shortly. "I am going to take you to an hotel, where we can talk."

I was trembling all over, as if I had been guilty of some crime, and she had just found me out in it.

"I—I must go by this train. There's—there's my luggage," I said hoarsely.

"Blow the luggage," said Harriet. "Lindsay will take care of it. Let her go by this train, and say—"

"Say what?" I asked, as she stopped short.

She turned to my maid, who was still looking very green, as she can't stand the sea even for half an hour.



"Tell Mr. Calstock," she said, "that Lady Cecilia was detained by Lady Langbourne, and —"

"Lady Langbourne!" I interrupted.

Harriet turned and looked at me steadily. I could see her curious eyes shining at me through the black lace of her veil.

"Yes. Lady Langbourne sent me across by the Ryde boat, to ask you to wait to take some commissions from her."

"Oh, all right," I said, puzzled and confused, while Harriet turned again to Lindsay and gave her orders what to do.

I had to confirm these, for Lindsay did not much like being spoken to by her, and then I saw my luggage wheeled away, and found myself left to the companionship of my cousin.

"Now," said she, "I'll take you to the hotel where I always stay, and we'll have some tea."

I knew there was something more to be gone through than just tea, but I was helpless in her determined hands, and a few minutes later we had got into a fly and were being driven into Southsea.

We stopped at an hotel where Harriet was known, and she asked for a private room and took me into it.

Until the tea was served, and we had each sipped it and refused anything to eat, she said nothing of any importance. Then she had the table cleared, and when the waiter had left the room she locked the door and quietly put the key in her pocket.

I said nothing; but the window was open, and I walked out upon the balcony.

The next moment she had glided across the room and stood looking out at me, with a strange glow in her eyes. She had taken off her veil, and I could see her face, and I knew that I was in for a "scene."

## 64 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

I suppose she saw that I looked frightened, for she said:

"Come in. I'm not going to hurt you."

She stood back from the window, and I, trying to look as if I had nothing on my mind, stepped slowly inside again.

"Why are you going back to town?" she asked quietly.

There is one thing to be said for Harriet. She can always come up to Miss Trood's ideal, by remaining quiet and "lady-like" when any other woman would be at white heat.

"Gerald is not well," I said.

It would not be true to say that she laughed; but her mouth became a little wider, and a hoarse sound came from between her lips. I knew quite well that I was found out, and it struck me, even at that moment, as being strange that it was I, and not she, who felt like a culprit.

"Why didn't you wish me good morning?" she asked abruptly.

I tried still to appear unconcerned.

"Didn't I? Oh, I didn't see you at breakfast-time."

She frowned impatiently.

"Why have you avoided me to-day, Cis?"

I hesitated. It was of no use to fight the ground, inch by inch, when I knew I must be brought to earth at last. So I looked up, with a sort of gasp.

"I think you know," I said hoarsely.

I suppose she was rather taken aback to find that I had spirit enough to answer as I did, with a little fierce uplook at her, for her eyelids quivered and a slight flush came into her face.

But she recovered herself at once.

"I haven't the least idea. Pray tell me."

We were standing face to face, one on each side of the table in the middle of the room. Separated from her like that, and supporting myself on the table, I felt able to stand up to her. But it was as much as I could do to gasp out:

"I—I saw something—heard something—last night."

She flinched, and then she looked down at the table-cover as she said:

"I don't understand. What did you see or hear?"

I wanted to speak quietly and steadily, as she did. But I couldn't. It was such a dreadful thing to have to say, so horrible, so disgusting, that it made me feel sick and cold even to think of it.

"I opened my door to go to your room to ask for some toilet vinegar. And—you were not in your room."

"Not in my room? Oh, I know now. I had to fetch my maid. That was why I was absent."

I said nothing. It would be best if she would leave it at that. So I turned away and moved towards a chair. But she flew across the room and gripped my shoulder.

"Was it Roberts you saw, or me?"

"It was neither."

"Come, what do you mean?"

"Oh, Harriet, must I say it? It's too awful, too shocking! I went downstairs and you were with Lord Hugh at that time of night."

I just glanced at her, and saw that her complexion was almost green. She knew that, as she would have said, "the game was up." She stood a few moments, quite silent, while I waited and limply tried to drag myself away. But she would not let me go.

At last she laughed, a weak, hoarse little laugh, and

thrust me suddenly away from her, so that I fell into the arm-chair by the fire-place.

"You were playing the spy, then, I suppose?"

"No. But, after what I had seen, how could I go quietly to bed, and forget it?"

"Forget what?"

"I can't say it, I can't, I can't! What is the good of forcing the words out of my mouth again and again, when you know that I know all about it? I didn't want to know it, I hate having to know. But what I once suspected has come to pass. How can you let that man make love to you, Harriet?"

I covered my face with my hands, and fought to keep quiet and not to cry. It was a long time before she spoke again.

Then I heard a little sliding sound, and I felt her sinking to the floor beside me, and inhaled the perfume which is always about her, "wild violets," I think she calls it. And then her hand, which was hot and dry, stole into mine.

"Come, Cis," she said, "you're not hard-hearted, I know. You'll listen to me, won't you?"

Her voice had that curious caressing sound that nobody could resist, and I knew that she would be able to make me promise anything she liked. But I meant to get a promise in return, meant it with all my soul, so I set my teeth hard and tried to speak harshly and decidedly as I said:

"Of course I'll listen. But I promise nothing more than that."

"That's all I'm asking, dear."

She drew my hands down from my face and made me look at her. And then I was frightened, for she looked so very, very different—pale, and haggard,

and lined, and oh, ever so much older than she usually does.

"Do you think I am a wicked woman, Cis?"

"I don't want to think so," I said. "And, of course, it's not for me to judge you, or anybody. But it's horrible to have to know what I do know."

"Why know it then? Why not take my word for it that you were mistaken, absurdly mistaken?"

"You were not in your room, Harriet."

"Not in my room? Have I not just told you I had to fetch my maid, Roberts? I was away only a few minutes."

So saying she crossed the apartment with a very offended air.

I looked at her very quietly. There must have been a silent accusation in my look, for now she flew back to me and, grasping my shoulder, asked:

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Oh, Harriet, you know. I went downstairs to the music-room and I saw —"

"Well," she interrupted, "what if you did? Why make such a fuss about just an innocent coincidence? I was hot, and went down for the coolness, and he did the same. What harm was there in our having just a little chat? Remember, he is one of the kindest men in the world."

"All the same, Harriet, you must have been mad, when you found him there, to stay with him at that hour."

"But you won't tell? You won't breathe a word of it?" Her voice trembled and grew hoarse. "Especially not to — your husband."

I cried out. And she seized my hands again and squeezed them up in hers.

## 68 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

"If he were to know, it would be all up with me," she said, and I could not help noticing that, in her excitement, she had now dropped the pretence that I hadn't seen what I did see. "For Sir John is one of his clients."

That was just what I had remembered, and the thought of having to face Gerald, now that Harriet had confessed to me, was dreadfully hard to bear.

"I do wish," I said hurriedly, "that you hadn't met me to-day. It would have been better, much better, to let me go back without having seen you and talked to you. Now I shan't know how to meet him, if he should ask me any questions."

Her face suddenly flushed, and then grew white again.

"That's just what I'm dreading," she said. "If once Sir John were to fancy anything of that kind to be true, he would simply set to work, and being rich, as he is, I should stand no chance, no chance at all."

"Of course you wouldn't," I said. "Because you haven't made any attempt to keep away from Lord Hugh —"

"Hush! Don't say that name, for Heaven's sake! Look here, Cis, you've gone through some hard times too. You've had to marry the wrong man, while you cared for some one else. Oh, yes, don't try to pull your hands away. You know you were fond of Jack once, when you married Sir Lionel Eberhard. And you must have been fond, I'm sure, of your present husband before you married him, and before your first husband was dead."

"But to be fond of a man is one thing —" I began.

She interrupted me.

"Oh, yes, for you cold people who can keep your feelings under proper control, I dare say it is. But

I'm not like that. I don't pretend to be very 'good.' If I were as cold as a stone, of course I should find it easy enough to live the life of a statue, and to die in the odor of sanctity, as no doubt you will do. But I'm not like that. I'm no saint: I'm only just a woman. And sympathy is a necessity to me."

"Then why don't you?" I said quickly. "Why don't you separate yourself from Sir John, and let him set you free?"

"That seems odd advice for a saint to give," said Harriet, and a little spice of malice suddenly appeared in her tone.

I protested energetically.

"I'm not a saint. Nothing is more ridiculous than to call me one. It's quite true that I don't see so much harm in running away from a man who behaves like a brute to his wife."

She frowned.

"A brute. Sir John doesn't do that. He is unsympathetic, cloddish, that's all."

Then I added: "At any rate, you find it impossible to love him, and you do love some one else. Why not put an end to it all by leaving him, then? It would be better for both of you, and for the children too, than — doing as you're doing now."

She sat back and looked at me fiercely.

"I'm doing nothing now," she said.

I got up from the chair and went to the door. But it was locked, so I couldn't open it. Harriet got on her feet and came after me.

"Look here, Cis, you wouldn't like a divorce action in the family, would you? That wouldn't be good for anybody."

I turned to face her.

"No. It would be dreadful, of course. But it

would be better, a thousand times, than deceiving your husband, and in such a horrid, mean, shuddery way, too! Taking advantage of your friends, as you are doing."

"What friends?" said she quietly.

"Why, of Lady Langbourne, for one."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"She did the same when she was young. And, to do her justice, she'd never round on another woman," she said, with a reproachful look.

"Oh, Harriet, do you think I would round on you?"

"You won't promise to — to tell the truth, and say you saw nothing."

"How can I? You don't know how difficult it is to keep a secret, especially of that sort, from a person you're fond of."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"That's the worst of being in love with one's own husband," she said. "It puts you so much in his power."

"Well, it's better than being in the power of any other man."

"And so you mean to tell Mr. Calstock what you thought you saw?" demanded she.

"No, no, no, of course I won't, if I can help it. But supposing he should find out in any other way, won't you feel glad in the long run that the whole thing is done with and over?"

A light flashed out of her eyes.

"Why, no, I shouldn't," she said energetically. "I shouldn't think it better by any means to be thrown over by a man who is at least well off, and to be disgraced, and separated from my children, and to be utterly — utterly undone. How can you say anything so silly?"



"But if you were free Lord Hugh would marry you, wouldn't he?"

"I don't suppose for a moment that he would—or even that he could," she answered promptly. "And he is poor and in debt, so there would be very little gained if he did."

"Harriet, I hate the way you talk. As if it were all, all, only a question of money."

"Well, so it is. And you know it. It's all very well for you. It doesn't matter a bit what you do, because you're so rich. If you were free—"

"Oh, hush, pray!"

"I say if you were free—and it's of no use to pretend you're better than anybody else, and that such a thing couldn't happen to you—you would marry again as soon as you pleased, and practically whom you pleased, because you can afford it. I can't. I have no money of my own, and I should simply be done for, *déclassée*. It's all a question of money, like everything else nowadays."

"And do you mean to say that, with all that depending on it, you are so silly as to give yourself away as you do, Harriet? It's madness."

"Well, I'm not one of your cold, calculating sort. It would be better for me if I were, of course, but I'm not. Where I love, as I say, I can't be strong."

"But why don't you use common prudence, and, when you find yourself falling in love with a man whom you must know all about, why don't you take care not to meet him, instead of flying into danger?"

She moved impatiently.

"Oh, why don't I do this? Why don't I do that? I can't measure my conduct like you, tie up my affections into neat little parcels, and distribute them

in the proper places! I love, and I love madly, and there's an end of it!"

"And you mean to go on until it's all found out, and the things happen that you expect to happen?" I asked, aghast.

She looked at me and shook her head.

"No, of course not. I must pull myself up. Not that there is anything in what I have done to be ashamed of. I've always been faithful to my husband —"

"Oh, Harriet!"

She stamped her foot, and went on impatiently: "Though I admit appearances are against me, I've done things that prurient minds might take exception to."

"It doesn't need a prurient mind to take exception to breaking the commandments."

"I haven't done anything of the sort. But supposing I had — just assuming, for the sake of argument, that I had — I suppose you would think it your duty — that's the proper phrase, isn't it? — you would think it your duty to tell Mr. Calstock all about it as soon as you got home?"

"Oh, Harriet, you know I shouldn't! I'm more ashamed of it than you are!"

"Well, you would let it out if he were to question you."

"What could I do? You don't know how clever he is, and how he can worm things out."

"I see. Then you will think it your duty, when your husband asks you, presses you — there's nobody like a lawyer for hounding a woman down! — to tell him what you fancied you saw, and then, of course, if Sir John gets hold of the story, as of course he will, you will appear against me and give evidence in court."

I was silent. She knew very well that I should do none of the things she suggested, and it hurt me to hear her speak of them.

"Well," she said at last. "Why don't you answer? There's no need, surely, to be ashamed of your virtuous actions?"

I took no notice of her sneers, but going across to the table, and standing close to her, so that I could hold her eye to eye, I said:

"If you will swear to me never to do again what you did last night—I'll swear not to tell any one what I—*know*."

She heaved a sort of stifled sigh of relief.

"Of course I'll swear it," she said. "And in return I know that I can trust you perfectly. If your husband learns anything, it won't be from *you*."

"No," said I.

Even while I uttered the word I was conscious how very hard it would be for me to keep the oath I had offered to make, what a racking interrogatory I might have to submit to, and what dangers, vaguely understood, but vividly imagined, I might be exposing myself to by my oath.

But there were so many reasons for my standing by her, and they were so strong, that I could only take that course.

To refuse would be, I knew, to bring ruin upon her and scandal upon the family, to break up the home at Shire Place, as well as to bring a slur upon her children.

If, by swearing to keep her secret, I could make her break off this mad, wicked affair, and go back to decency and common sense, I felt that the best possible thing in the circumstances would have been done.

She took both my hands in hers and held them close to her.

"Now," she said, "look me in the face and swear that, whatever happens, you will let no one know what you saw — or imagined you saw — last night."

"I swear that, if you will swear never to do again what you did last night, and to break it off absolutely with Lord Hugh, I will never betray you, never tell any one, my husband or any one else, what I saw."

"I swear," she said solemnly, "I will never have anything to do with Lord Hugh again."

"And," I insisted, still holding her hands as she had held mine, "if you break your oath I am to be absolved from mine."

She snatched away her hands with violence, which was utterly unlike her.

"Oh, of course, of course," she said hurriedly. "But it will not happen, I swear it."

"Very well. Now let me go," I said.

I was anxious to be away, irritated and worried, longing to be by myself.

But my eagerness made her suspicious again.

"You won't, will you, pretend that you are absolved from keeping your oath because I locked you in?" she asked, as she took the key of the door out of her pocket.

"Of course not. I want to do the best I can for you and for the children. I have sworn, and I will keep my oath," I said.

She kissed me suddenly, gratefully I think, and let me out.

I had lost my train, but, though I knew that, I would not stay with her. I hurried out of the hotel and went to the station, where I had to wait till the seven-fifteen.

I was feeling very downcast and unhappy by the time I started for London. I had never had a secret from Gerald in the short time we had been married, and I had never expected to have one. Now, however, I was pledged to keep one which I foresaw would be full of difficulties. However, I couldn't regret my oath, for I thought it was the only thing that would be likely to keep Harriet, and her family, and our family, from a terrible scandal.

I felt that it was hard upon Sir John; but in such a tangle as this somebody must be badly treated. A horrid suggestion did dart into my mind that perhaps it was Harriet who was altogether in the wrong, and Sir John who was blameless. But, in any case, I could not help in the ruin of my own kinswoman, and, after all, I had bound myself to nothing but to hold my tongue.

The journey seemed dreadfully long, and when I got home it was past ten.

Gerald was in his study, and the moment he saw me he jumped up and came to meet me, and looking at me very anxiously after he had kissed me, he asked what had made me come away so suddenly.

There is something so penetrating in his eyes, something I have never seen in anybody else's eyes, that I felt I was growing red as I answered:

"You said you were seedy again, and I hated to stay away."

"What nonsense, child! I'm all right. And you were enjoying yourself, and the change must have been doing you good. Now you've come back so soon you won't feel the benefit of it at all."

"Never mind," I said. "We will go away together somewhere for a little while, and that will be much nicer than going away without you."

"And what did Lady Langbourne want with you that she made you send your maid back without you?"

"Oh, it wasn't Lady Langbourne at all," I said, determined not to tell anything but the truth if I could help it. "It was Harriet who kept me to have tea with her."

He frowned.

"Lady Usher," he said shortly rather. "Ah, yes, she was there, wasn't she?"

"Yes. And Letty Langbourne, and the Duchess of Newport, and Princess Adèle; besides three or four nobodies, gray people who just fill up backgrounds, and heaps of men."

"Who were the men?"

He had taken me to the sofa and was sitting beside me, looking affectionately at me even while he asked these questions with more appearance of interest than I liked.

"Oh, I don't even know the names of half of them," I said. "But Geoffrey Langbourne wasn't there, and the family was represented by two mild male cousins, or something of that sort, of old Lady Langbourne."

"Well, and the rest?"

"I'll try to remember the names of them all in the morning," I said. "But Sir Arnold Banbury brought me across from Cowes in his yacht, and was so devoted that, if you had been there, you ought to have been quite jealous."

Gerald smiled.

"If I could be jealous of such men as you have described him to be," he said, "I shouldn't be jealous of any one. Do you see?"

I nodded.

"I think so. If you thought me capable of caring

for a man like that, you would be incapable of caring for me. Is that it?"

"Exactly."

"You feel quite sure of me, even when I am among all those butterflies?"

"Yes. If you had been a butterfly, you wouldn't have taken up with a dull old sober-sides like me."

"Oh, Gerald, you're not dull. You're such a relief after all those people!" I said. "They get on my nerves, after a little while, with their perpetual chase after distraction of one kind or another. Now, with you I have to provide the distraction, and that flatters my vanity."

"I wonder whether you'll always be satisfied with such a quiet life as that we lead, compared to those of your friends!" said he.

"What makes you ask that? You've been getting low-spirited while I've been away!"

"I dare say I have. But when one thinks of the infinite capacity for enjoyment which your people possess, one wonders sometimes whether it was altogether wise of you to make such a choice as you have done."

"I see. You're getting tired of me!"

"That's it, I dare say," said he, caressing my head. "I'm a bit of a Don Juan, and a lady-killer, am I not, Cecilia?"

I laughed as I kissed him.

"If you were," I said, "you certainly wouldn't have had the supreme happiness of marrying me."

"It is a supreme happiness," said he gently; "it is happiness such as I never dreamed of."

"Haven't you ever been in love before?" I asked, delighted to find him in a talkative mood, which is rare with him.

## 78 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

"In love! Oh, yes, I dare say I've fancied myself in love many times. You've done that too, you know?" he added slyly.

"Don't," I said, getting red as I remembered what he knew about my fancy for Jack and the consequences of it. "What were they like, the girls you fell in love with before you met me? Were they at all like me?" I asked.

"I'm afraid they were not. They certainly weren't half so pretty."

"Well, describe them."

"I'm afraid I'm not much of a hand at a description. But there was one type of woman that appealed to me, in pictures chiefly, however."

"What type was that?"

"Well, I think I used to be attracted by Burne-Jones's women, with the hungry faces and long necks and green eyes," he said.

I had a most curious sensation when he said this; for the description reminded me of Harriet Usher, and she was just the one woman in the world whom, just then, I didn't want to think about.

I tried to laugh.

"I hope you have lost your fancy for the type," said I. "For it certainly isn't like me."

"No, it certainly isn't. However, I think I can put up with you, in default of finding my ideal," he said playfully.

I was thankful, when I went to bed, to think how well the evening had passed off, without any awkward questions or evasive answers.

But I was congratulating myself too soon.

When I got down to breakfast this morning I found Gerald reading his letters, and looking very grave.

"Can you find me the A B C?" he asked, looking



up from a letter he was reading. And when I found it he ran his finger down one page of it without telling me what he wanted it for.

And when I saw his finger stop at the station nearest to Shire Place, Sir John Usher's place, my heart was in my mouth. I said nothing, but went on pouring out the coffee. He had not yet taken his seat.

"I have to go down into Berkshire this afternoon," he said. "So don't expect me back before eight, or perhaps later. Don't wait dinner for me."

"Business?" I asked, feeling that I changed color, for I knew what the answer would be.

"Yes."

He took his place and looked across the angle of the table at me.

"You didn't tell me the names of all the people you met at Cowes. Who were the men?"

I knew it was coming.

"There was Sir Arnold Banbury, and the two Ockleys, and Lord Hugh Hawkhurst"—I felt that I was growing scarlet, but I pushed valiantly on—"and Sir Charles Cranleigh, and—I'm afraid I don't, for the moment, remember the names of the others," I said.

"Oh, well, never mind the others." He was looking at me in a way that made me feel guilty and uncomfortable. "Lord Hugh Hawkhurst was there?"

"Yes. He arrived the day after I did."

"You have met him before, when you were with Lady Usher."

"Yes. I told you about it."

"I know." He looked at me steadily, and then asked quite point-blank, with the shrewdness which I had been dreading: "What made you come back to town so suddenly?" I stammered, unable to tell a lie at such short notice. "Was it," he asked, in a

## 80 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

more severe tone, a tone which made me think of witness-boxes and cross-examinations, "was it something you — *found out?*"

I drew my breath in gasps.

"W — w — what should I find out?" I asked.

"That's what I want to know. Did you find out anything?"

"Won't you please tell me what you mean, Gerald?"

He stared at me, his lips tightly pressed together, and his brows contracted. Then he said very quietly:

"Yes, I'll tell you. Sir John Usher has reason to suspect that he has lost his wife's affections, and I am wondering whether you know something about it."

"Oh, Gerald!"

He looked at me steadily:

"Do you know anything about it?"

"What should I know? Why do you ask me?"

"Don't ask me questions back, but answer mine. Do you know anything about this?" I hesitated, and he framed his question in another way: "Did you see any reason, while you were at Lady Langbourne's, for thinking that Lady Usher was flirting with any of the men there?"

"Oh, yes, she is rather a flirt," I answered readily.

"And with whom was she flirting?"

I hesitated, but I knew what I meant to answer and only delayed for reasons of discretion:

"I should think that, on the whole, she flirted more with Lord Hugh Hawkhurst than with any of the others."

"Yes, so should I think so," said Gerald dryly. "And now tell me, was it because of anything you saw that you came away so much earlier than you had intended to do?"

I hesitated.

"I shouldn't like to say that," I said at last. "At the same time, after what you said about Lord Hugh, I must confess that I would rather not have met him again at all, and that I did not like to see Harriet talking and laughing with him. I told her so," I added boldly.

"And what did she say?"

"She said I exaggerated, but when I persisted, she promised not to flirt with him any more."

Gerald was frowning more and more as I went on to the end. I felt horribly wicked, knowing that I was deceiving him, careful as I was not to tell any actual lie. But I had given my oath, and I believed that I was doing the only thing possible for the best for everybody.

"And is that all you know, positively all?" he asked, so dryly, so sarcastically, that I broke down and burst into tears.

For once he just let me cry, instead of coming over to console me. I had to dry my eyes by myself, and when I looked up he was pacing up and down the breakfast-room, whistling softly to himself, and apparently not taking any notice of me. I felt deeply wounded and hurt, and I got up and walked to the door.

But he stopped me, saying quietly:

"Sit down a moment, please."

If I had been a prisoner in the dock I could not have been more helpless than I felt in the face of his quiet determination to find out from me what he wanted to know. But the knowledge that I was at bay woke in me a spirit of resistance which seemed quite new and strange even to myself. I sat down in a leather arm-chair and held the sides.

He stood in front of me, but a little way off.

"Now tell me, like a good girl, all you know, absolutely all, without reserve, about your cousin and what she has been doing."

I looked up, stubborn and calm.

"I have nothing to tell," I said.

"Oh, yes, you have. You have admitted it."

"Well, what I have admitted you know. There's nothing else for me to tell you."

He looked at me steadily.

"Oh, all right. Will you swear, then, that you know nothing more, absolutely nothing, concerning your cousin, Lady Usher, and Lord Hugh, than you have told me?"

"I'm not going to swear anything," I said.

"I think you will when I tell you that it is very important to me. I'll put it differently: will you swear that it was nothing concerning your cousin's conduct which brought you back to town?"

Of course, I might have known that he would connect Harriet's detaining me to tea with my sudden determination to come to London at once. I had thought it so clever, last night, not to hide that incident from him; but now that it had to be taken in conjunction with Sir John's suspicions, I saw that it was at once important in Gerald's eyes.

I hesitated, I tried to speak, faltered, and broke down again.

But Gerald was not now softened by seeing my distress. He did not come near me, though, looking up out of the corner of my eye, I could see that his hands were clenched, and that it cost him a severe effort not to give way and allow himself to be coaxed and persuaded to cease tormenting me.

"I won't swear anything," I said at last angrily. "And you have no right to torment me so."

"You might be sure I shouldn't do what is so very painful for us both without a good reason."

"You mean that you want to help Sir John in his unkind treatment of his wife?" I said fiercely.

"I hope you know me better than to think I should do that. As a matter of fact, Sir John Usher has never neglected his wife, never failed in his duty to her in any way."

"That's his version, of course."

"And it's the version of all who know them both. I think, Cecilia, if you knew him it would be yours."

"Well, I wouldn't help him to get rid of his obligations to her, even if I could," I flashed out.

Gerald stared at me, and I, expecting that he would be very angry, was disconcerted to see that his look was frankly appreciative and admiring.

"Well," he said, "I think I like your spirit, though it would have made things considerably easier for me if you had not been so staunch. To tell you the truth, I have no manner of doubt that Lady Usher has been a bad wife to her husband, and I know that she has no shadow of an excuse, for that he has been a most generous, easy-going, and forgiving husband, to whom any decent woman would have been grateful and attached. I know that she has shown herself utterly unworthy of his kindness, and neglectful of her duties as wife and mother, that she is selfish and extravagant, and thinks of nothing but her own pleasure and convenience. And I know that the best thing that can happen to Sir John and to his children is that he should be able to free himself at the earliest possible moment from a wife who has proved herself to be vicious, unprincipled, and wholly unworthy of trust."

He spoke with so much fire and conviction that I saw it would be quite hopeless for me to attempt to plead Harriet's cause with him. So I thought the less said the better.

"She is my cousin," I said shortly.

"I know, and I am sorry for it. I think you carry your ideas of loyalty too far in attempting to shelter such a woman from the just penalty of her sins, seeing that the penalty she ought to pay would include the deliverance of her victims."

I had never seen him so deeply moved to anger, not even when he was so much disgusted at Sir Lionel's treatment of me. And I can't help thinking that it always seems to a man to be a worse thing in a woman to neglect her duty to her husband, than in a man to neglect his to his wife.

He went out of the room without saying any more, and I almost thought he would have started for the office without bidding me good-by.

But he did come back, when he was quite ready to go, and gave me a kiss and said, "Good-by, Cecilia."

But there was a difference, and I knew that the stand I had made, however much he might admire it in the abstract, had made a difference in his feeling for me.

I don't mean to say I think he loves me any the less, but — it's not quite the same.

I wish Harriet were at the bottom of the sea! It is too bad that she should come between me and my husband with her wild, wicked acts! And I think when a woman has had two children, if she can't love her husband she ought to be able to behave as if she did! It is awful, shocking that I should be bound to risk my husband's love for sheltering a woman like that!

CURZON STREET,

*July 20th.*

WHEN I had written in my diary yesterday I spent a few unhappy hours before I made up my mind what to do. Then I sat down and wrote a very careful letter to Harriet.

I had definitely taken up her side, and the mere fact that I had made me the more anxious for her to profit by what I had done for her at some cost to myself. So I wrote to Cowes, warning her that what we had talked about was being talked about by other people, and I underlined "other people," so that I think she will have the sense to know it means Sir John. If she hasn't the sense to be careful and discreet now, and to give up acquaintances who lead her into wickedness, she doesn't deserve to escape punishment.

I don't want to be hard, but I do think any man or woman ought to be able to keep from loving a person whom one knows it is dangerous to love!

I waited very anxiously for Gerald's return, but when he came back he said nothing to me about the visit to Sir John's, and I thought it better not to ask any questions.

But yet I wish he had told me something about it. Now I don't know what to think, or what is going to happen.

I have done my very best for Harriet, taken the greatest care not to say a word more than I could help, and yet I can't feel comfortable about it all.

On the one hand, I am sure that Gerald guesses something of the truth, and that he is angry with me because I won't and can't betray my cousin. On the other hand, I am afraid that Sir John Usher is not satisfied, for I think Gerald would have told me if things had settled down.

It hurts me to see that I have not got his full confidence, although I know it is my own fault, because I can't give him mine. I do hope this sore feeling will die away, and that Harriet will settle down and behave properly for the future. If she doesn't, she will deserve the worst that can happen to her.



CURZON STREET,

*July 22nd.*

I HAVE had a very angry letter from Harriet. She takes care not to say anything to incriminate herself, but she takes it for granted I have been saying more than I ought, if I have not actually betrayed her.

I shall not write to her again, and perhaps the belief that she is in danger may help to keep her straight. She is still at Cowes, so I suppose nothing serious has happened between her and Sir John.

Gerald is very thoughtful and preoccupied, and won't hear of a holiday for himself, though he says I ought to have one, as I am not looking well. It is all this worry about Harriet which is making me seedy and wretched.

CURZON STREET,

*July 30th.*

YESTERDAY things came to a head. Early in the afternoon mamma came unexpectedly, looking rather excited and unlike herself. Instead of dashing into the matter she had come about, as she usually does, she began to talk about the wretched weather we have had, and about Gerald's health, and said I was looking frightful.

At last I said:

"Well, Mamma, I'm sure you have something on your mind. What is it?"

She sighed and threw a glance at the ceiling.

"Well," she said, "it's so horrid that one puts off talking about it as long as possible."

And then, of course, I guessed that she had come about Harriet.

"What is it?" I said.

She drew her chair a little nearer to mine. We were in my boudoir, which I have made as pretty as a picture, with pale blue satin panels and white enamel, and French furniture in pale Pompadour brocade.

"I hope, my dear," she began in a tone quite unlike hers, for once dropping into almost a solemn tone, "that you will never deceive your husband!"

"Mamma!" I cried indignantly.

But she went on quite calmly:

"It really never is worth while. It is better to put up with anything than do that. A married

woman should always remember that women are not men, and that we are helpless, absolutely helpless in any sort of tussle with a man. Also that husbands are not like other men, for they always consider we have had the best of the bargain at the outset, and that afterwards they have a right to make it up to themselves as best they can."

I made no comment, for it is never of any use to oppose one's own opinions to mamma's, especially on a matrimonial question. If I had dared to say anything, I might have mentioned that she herself has always had her own way, and that, whatever poor papa's faults may have been, she has certainly not had the worst of the bargain with him. I cannot remember the time when she did not seem to have more money to spend than he, or the fullest opportunities for amusing herself in her own way with her dresses and her bridge parties and her little dinners; and though she often bemoans his "neglect," I am sure she would be bored to death if she were to see more of papa than she does see.

After a short silence, during which mamma got up and inspected a water-colored picture of two ladies in eighteenth-century costume singing at a spinet, she came back to me, fluttering across the room in her airy way, and said:

"Isn't this a shame of Sir John Usher? You know all about it, of course?"

"What has he done?" I asked, much startled.

"Oh, nothing *openly*, as yet. But he wrote to Harriet while she was at Cowes, telling her to spend a few days in town before coming home to Shire Place."

Mamma spoke quickly, and looked at me askance.

"Well?" said I. "Harriet loves town."

## 90 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

"Not at the end of July, my dear. Just when everybody is either away or going away, and when there's nothing in the shops but what is left over from the season's rubbish, and the sales that bring the butchers' wives in from the suburbs!"

Mamma always grows angry on the subject of the "sales," because they bring crowds to the West End, and make her own shopping, as she says, "impossible."

"Is she with you now?" I asked.

"Yes. She came yesterday. I suppose I shall have to take her away with me," she added in a plaintive tone.

I was troubled. This certainly looked bad.

"There hasn't been any quarrel, has there?" I asked anxiously. "He hasn't refused to have her back?"

"Not in so many words. But it looks like the beginning of a separation, doesn't it? She thinks so herself, poor dear!"

I said nothing. I wondered how much mamma knew, or guessed.

"Has she tried to see him?" I asked.

"Not yet. She wants to think things over first. This letter from him came as a shock to her, you see, and she came up straight to me, and we talked things over. I told her I would come and see you — and dear Gerald." There was a look in mamma's eyes as she uttered my husband's name which quite belied the affection expressed by her words. "I am sure he will do his best to smooth things over, not only for the sake of our family, but of his client himself."

Then I knew why she had come. It was to try to

persuade me to intervene in the delicate matter of my husband's business with his own client.

"Well, I don't see what he can do," I said. "A lawyer can't dictate to his client, he can only advise, can he?"

"But he might advise him to do what is best for the family, might he not? And a word from you—"

"Mamma, I simply can't," I said quickly. "Nothing would induce me to attempt to interfere in Gerald's business. It would be of no use if I did, for one thing, and for another, I should feel it a great liberty for me to take."

"Oh, nonsense. Every man is influenced, in his business and in everything else, by some woman or other. If it isn't his wife's advice that he takes, it's the advice of somebody else's wife."

But I shook my head.

"That may be true of many men, but it isn't of Gerald," I said.

She laughed.

"Your husband, my dear, is just like other women's husbands," she said. "Of course, it's natural that you should think, at the outset, that he is different, but you will find out the truth by and by. And my advice to you is to get the hold you mean to have upon him now, or you will never get it at all, and some other woman will get it instead of you."

"Mamma, is it of any use to argue with me? I've quite made up my mind never to interfere, and never to give my advice unless Gerald asks for it. Your plan may be very good in some cases, but men are not all alike, whatever you say, and I know Gerald would not suffer any one, not even me—to intrude upon him in his professional capacity."

## 92 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

I think I was rather proud of the decided way in which I uttered this speech, but, of course, it made no impression upon mamma, except to make her impatient.

She stayed the whole day with me, much to my distress, because I guessed she meant to see Gerald, and to try the effect of her usually triumphant wiles upon him!

When he came home from the office he was looking so very tired that I hoped mamma would spare him, but she never does spare anybody when she wants anything, and we had scarcely got half-way through dinner when she began slyly congratulating herself upon having introduced "into the family" such a clever man as he is.

Gerald bowed, and I saw a little twitching of the corners of his mouth, which told me he guessed what was coming.

"When Lord Rushbury first heard of Cecilia's attachment to you," she went on, "he was angry, because, of course, he wanted her to marry one of his horsy friends. But I said we should all be the better for some brains in the family, for we are really rather a headstrong, wild lot, and want a little intellect among us to keep the balance."

"You are very kind," said Gerald, "but I'm afraid you flatter me, Lady Rushbury."

"Oh, no, I don't. The delicate and tactful way in which you got poor Cecilia out of all her difficulties, during that unhappy time abroad, when Sir Lionel was alive!" And again mamma cast up her eyes, in that pretty way of hers, to intimate her horror of poor Sir Lionel, whom she liked so much when I was married to him. "I was greatly struck by your calm force of character and intellect then, and I, for one,

was not in the least surprised at the way things turned out."

And she smiled very prettily, first at him and then at me, while I, knowing that this was but the preliminary skirmish, almost held my breath.

"I'm delighted to hear you say so, Lady Rushbury," said Gerald calmly. "Because, since you think so much more of my tact and intelligence than I deserve, you will help to persuade Cecilia to agree to my wishes when I advise her in money matters."

Mamma's face fell a little, and I felt very uncomfortable. For nobody knows better than she does that there is a continual and rather painful struggle going on between Gerald and me over the little presents I have to give papa and mamma.

She recovered herself very quickly, and said:

"It was not so much about money that I was thinking, as about the family and the little troubles and differences which must always arise. At this present moment, for instance, I am in great distress about my niece Harriet Usher and her husband, Sir John. The poor girl is in the deepest grief because he is angry with her. It is all about nothing, and I only wish I had any influence with Sir John myself, and I would at once go down to him and intercede for her. But unluckily I scarcely know him, and he would not listen to me. I do hope, Gerald, you will assure him that he is mistaken in thinking he had any cause to be displeased with her. Do, do play the noble part of peacemaker between them."

While she was speaking I watched Gerald furtively, and saw that not a muscle of his face moved. I am always puzzled and interested by the strange faculty he has of separating the man from the lawyer, and I remember the dry way in which he used to

## 94 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

speak to me when Sir Lionel was alive, as if I were a mere machine. While, since we have been married, he has confessed that his heart was bleeding for me all the time.

But somehow, I don't think his heart bleeds for poor Harriet.

He listened with his head bent in that courteous way of his, which makes people who don't know him think that he is so pliable in their hands; but when she stopped, he just looked up and met her eyes for a moment, and said dryly:

"I am afraid my position is not such that I can play any part with Sir John but that he chooses, Lady Rushbury."

Mamma drew herself up, and grew very red.

"Of course, I'm not asking you to do anything unprofessional," she said.

"Of course not."

He would say no more, and she had to drop the subject. But she was furious, and the things she said of Gerald when we were in the drawing-room by ourselves after dinner were quite inconsistent with her declared appreciation of his intellect and character!

Gerald said not a word to me, when she had gone, about either mamma or Harriet. But his silence on the subject is not reassuring. I am afraid things are going on in the wrong way all the time.



CURZON STREET,

*July 31st.*

I WENT to see mamma yesterday, as she had asked me to do, and I found Harriet at Brook Street with her, as I expected. She is in very low spirits, and very angry with me. Nothing I say can persuade her that I have not broken faith, and told Gerald something. Again and again I tried to convince her that I have said nothing, but she won't believe me. Mamma left us alone together, I suppose by Harriet's wish, and then she attacked me at once.

"Why did you not keep your word, and tell your husband the truth, that there was nothing in the stories Sir John had picked up about me and Lord Hugh?" she demanded at once.

"Harriet," I said, "I wish you would believe that I've kept my word to you absolutely. I refused to tell Gerald anything, and when he put it to me point-blank that I knew something, I told him I should say nothing even if I knew anything."

"That was not the way to speak for me," retorted she. "You should have sworn that there was nothing between us."

"How could I do that, when the flirtation you have been carrying on is known to everybody? There was no question of that. One had to admit that, and pretend there was nothing more."

"There is nothing more," said she fiercely.

I was silent.

"If that's what you call taking my part and keeping

your oath, I think I should have been safer if I had said nothing to you."

"Harriet, it's of no use to quarrel with me because of your own folly and the fruits of it. Sir John has learnt all about it from somebody else, some servant or —"

"There is nobody else who could know anything, I mean guess anything," she said quickly. "And Sir John is the last person to listen to the tittle-tattle of servants. He has his good points as well as his bad ones," she added uneasily, "and I know he would never have written to me as he did if something hadn't leaked out."

"It was not through me."

She looked at me scornfully.

"I quite do you the justice to believe you didn't mean to let it leak out," she said. "But all the same, it's plain your husband has wormed something out of you, and communicated his information to Sir John. I am trembling for the next letter I get from him. He has practically ordered me to remain away at his pleasure, and here am I, stranded, waiting for something dreadful to happen!"

I thought that it was not likely Sir John would have left her in ignorance if he had meant to serve divorce papers upon her, and I could not help thinking that this probationary period through which she was being made to pass ought to do her good, since it was the very least punishment she deserved.

"I don't suppose anything dreadful will happen, if only you will keep your word, and be careful," I said.

She looked at me angrily.

"Oh, you are so smug, so good, with your lectures and your advice," she flashed out. "Wait a little,

and see whether you can take it as easily and as coolly when your own turn comes!"

I thought she was very ungrateful, for I had done my best. And the vicious way in which she spoke, as it were flinging taunts at me as if they were curses, made me feel uncomfortable and unhappy.

The very fact that this matter, in which I was only indirectly concerned, had caused a sort of coolness already between Gerald and me, had made me uneasy, and had filled me with dread lest some day I too might, as she suggested, find myself engaged in a real difference with my husband, in spite of all my love for him, and his for me.

Before I went back home, mamma asked me whether I would come away to Dieppe with her and Harriet for a holiday, and I said I should be very glad to go, for Gerald had said I must have another change, as I could not stay in town through August. So it was arranged that I should ask him when he came back from the office.

But he at once refused his permission to my going with mamma if Harriet were to be with us. And this refusal made me sure that he and Sir John were both convinced of the truth about Harriet.

I wrote and told mamma I couldn't go with them, and she came here within an hour of receiving my letter, to ask me why. And when I told her she pretended to be very angry, but at last she said she would send Harriet to Fouroaks for a few weeks — as it is there is no one there now — while she and I could go to Dieppe together.

I thought this was rather hard on Harriet, but mamma is only sympathetic as long as her sympathy does not have to clash with her own pleasure.

She settled the matter within the next four-and-

twenty hours, and though, when I went to Brook Street, to make a sort of apology to her, Harriet called Gerald her worst enemy, and a serpent and a snake in the grass and a vile, pettifogging lawyer, and I had hard work not to retort in a way I should not like to have done, she agreed to go down to Four Oaks, and renewed her promise of good behavior.

Indeed, I am sorry for her now, for I think she is very sorry, if not for having deceived her husband, at least for having been found out.

I really think that is the only sort of repentance that people like Harriet ever feel, and it is better than nothing, as it may help to keep her from doing it again.

I should feel more sorry for her still if she hadn't said such unkind things about Gerald. I am sure he would be only too glad to act as peacemaker in the family if he could. But, knowing, as I do, what he thinks of Sir John, who is his client, and what he thinks of Harriet, who isn't, I can't help seeing that there is nothing for him to do but to guard Sir John's interests, and to act on his instructions.

I wish Gerald could come away to Dieppe with us! He says all he shall be able to do in the way of a holiday is to take a week at the end of August or the beginning of September, as he has so much important work to do.

I do hope none of the work is for Sir John!  
Poor Harriet!

DIEPPE,

*August 6th.*

THIS is a delightful place, and I should be as happy as a bird here with mamma, if only Gerald could be here too! I know a fortnight of this sea air, and of the fun and liveliness of the place, would make him a different man.

However, he writes that he is better, and that is enough to make me enjoy myself twice as much as I did before I knew that.

Mamma looks like my sister, only that she is much better dressed than I. She doesn't really bathe, but she has brought half a dozen very pretty bathing costumes, in which she paddles gingerly into the water every morning, and in which she looks as if she had stepped out of the chorus of a musical comedy!

Each of her bathing caps has a neat little fringe of curls sewn inside it, to "save her own hair from getting wet." But she never risks that!

We have met quite a lot of people we know here, some of them staying, and some of them just going through. And yesterday Sir Arnold Banbury arrived in the *Lucette*.

I was quite glad to see him, for he is such a merry, nice little fellow. Mamma was much more pleased than I, because she was beginning to get bored, and now she can go on the yacht whenever she likes for a cruise, and though I don't think she enjoys it much till she is back again on shore and can talk about it, this helps to keep life from becoming too monotonous.

I wish she were a better sailor, however, as it makes me feel so guilty to know that she is lying down in the cabin trying to stave off sea-sickness, while I am sitting on deck learning how to sail a boat under Sir Arnold's instructions, and enjoying the salt breeze immensely.

Mamma and I must make an odd contrast when we start on a cruise, for she is dressed in the smartest white serge, trimmed with little scarlet anchors outlined with gold thread, a coat to match lined with white satin, and a little waistcoat which is a perfect glory of gold and white silk embroidery, while her yachting-cap is perched daintily on a head which is beautifully built up with little curls that never come out and look untidy. I don't know what her maid does to them, but I know that it is done before the curls go on mamma's head!

And her little white kid shoes are evidently not made for wear, either on board a ship or anywhere else.

As she trips on the yacht in this get-up, I stump after her in a thick navy serge frock without any trimming at all, buttoned up to the chin in a mackintosh, while my yachting-cap is crammed down over my eyes, and my hair is all tucked away so tightly that you can scarcely see that I have any.

That is the way we go on board.

When we come back, if the sea is at all rough, I am afraid the contrast — although mamma keeps to the cabin, and I stay on deck — is still greater. For no powder can prevent mamma from looking green about the cheeks, and no pains will keep my hair from coming out and flying in untidy little rings, all about my face!

And yet she will persist in saying she likes it, and in

going when I should be quite willing to stay at home!

I have heard from Harriet; she seems to think things are settling down, as she has had no bad news.

That is something.

Mamma and I don't talk much about her, because it rubs me up the wrong way to hear mamma's view of it all. She only points out how foolish and wicked it is of Harriet *not to be more careful*, and I dare not ask her what she means, because I'm afraid that I can guess. Mamma hates Sir John; it seems they don't get on well together; and I can see that mamma thinks there is nothing strange in his wife's liking another man better than she does him.

Whenever she tries to get the conversation round to Gerald I always fight to get it away again; for she has already let drop one or two comments about him which I don't like, and I don't want to have to quarrel with her, as I must if she gets really "nasty" about him.

After all, he has to do his best to protect my interests; and, of course, he is quite right to object to her making me put down in my accounts the three hundred pounds I gave her for doing up her bedroom as "Flowers, hats, gloves, etcetera" for myself!

DIEPPE,

*August 20th.*

I MIGHT have known everything was going on too well to last! I am again very unhappy and uneasy, and this time I really don't think I have been to blame at all. But when Gerald hears about it I don't think he will ever let me go away with mamma again, and perhaps he will not even let me visit her!

It began so simply, and went on so tragically! I can't believe even now that it was more than a horrid accident, but the consequences may be dreadful for me.

Sir Arnold came round to our hotel yesterday morning, to beg us to go for a cruise, as the wind was right and the sky was clear, and there were no signs of the rain we have had so much of lately.

I didn't want to go, but mamma, as usual, agreed at once. I think it is because she looks so pretty in her yachting things that she never can say no to an invitation, although she must know that she generally suffers for it.

It was settled that we should start at about two o'clock, which is the earliest hour we can get mamma afloat.

All went well till the start, but when we got down to the harbor the wind had got up a little and the sea looked rough, and I, seeing that mamma looked rather troubled at the prospect, suggested giving up the cruise.

But Sir Arnold grew so plaintive, and mamma was so angry at the suggestion that she was afraid, that I



was talked down, and we all went on board, crossing over one of the other yachts to get to the *Lucette*.

Sir Arnold took me aft at once, and I sat down beside the tiller, while mamma seated herself in one of the basket chairs on the fore part of the boat.

Sir Arnold came with me, and told me how delighted he was that I had come.

"I was so afraid," he said, "when the sky had clouded over, that Lady Rushbury might change her mind about coming."

"Mamma is always game," said I. "It was I who suggested that we should stay at home."

"It would have been too cruel," said he, "for I've been looking forward to this all the morning."

I was already feeling rather sorry we had come, for the little man is getting too attentive. I don't think there is the least harm in him, only I don't want to have things said, and I know how easy it is to start gossip, especially among mamma's friends, of whom there are so many here now.

We had a good deal of trouble in getting clear, as the harbor is so full of yachts now, and there were a lot of other boats, besides fishing-smacks and other craft, so that there was a great deal to watch that was interesting.

We had the narrowest escape possible of having our rudder carried away, and I was desperately excited as I watched the sailors at work with fend-offs and boat-hooks.

But we got out without accident, and soon found ourselves sailing out of the harbor into the roughest sea I ever sailed on in a small yacht.

It was most exciting, and I enjoyed it all the time. The salt spray stung my face, and the wind cut like the lashes of whips. But I was well wrapped up, and

I lay quietly, watching the waves swirl along over the gunwale, and break into foam-like fringe on the top.

The sky had grown darker and the wind stronger before we got very far, and presently there arose a discussion between Sir Arnold and his skipper as to whether it would not be better to turn back or to run into another port, as there was a prospect of a storm breaking over us.

It didn't occur to me that there was any danger, although, of course, I could see that we were in a much heavier sea than I had ever been out in before.

But presently I saw on Sir Arnold's face a look of real anxiety, and then I knew that he was afraid, for us, at least.

I laughed. I don't think I am a coward; I always feel so strung up at such a time that I am ready to face risks, and to tell myself that one can only die once. I suppose that is what most people feel when they are faced with such a prospect as that which seemed to be before us, and that that is why so many people make a brave end.

"What's the matter, Sir Arnold?" I said. "Are you afraid we shall be sea-sick?"

He tried to smile.

"No," said he, "I'm not afraid of that. But I think we shall hardly get back without a wetting."

"Oh, poor mamma!" I cried. And then I glanced towards the deck chair, which she had long since vacated, and which a sailor was now taking out of the way. "I had forgotten her! I'm afraid she will be really ill, and nervous besides! I must go down to her!"

"Better stay where you are," said Sir Arnold hastily. "That is, if you're not afraid of getting awfully drenched."

"Oh, I don't mind that a bit, as you know," I said.

And I remained where I was, as much because it was difficult to move about and not wholly without risk, as because I thought that mamma might be alarmed if I were to go to her, and might think we were all going to the bottom.

When we had gone on a little further, and the sky had grown blacker and the waves higher, I began to perceive that there was something worse than a drenching to be feared.

Some of the older sailors began to whistle, which is, I know, a sure sign with these men that there is danger ahead; while Sir Arnold, though he tried to keep up some kind of conversation with me, and even to pay me compliments, was quite plainly more concerned with his yacht and the chances of bringing her and us safely to land than with any real interest in my "blue eyes."

The land had disappeared in a blinding mist of rain and spray; more and more canvas had been taken in till we were scudding along with very little more than bare poles.

And at last, when we came to an opening in the land where I could dimly see signs of buildings and a pier, the skipper told Sir Arnold that to attempt to enter the harbor in such weather was impossible.

There was another consultation, and presently Sir Arnold came back to me, looking very much disturbed, and told us that we were going to make an attempt to go back to Dieppe, but warning me that it was just possible we might not be able to reënter the harbor for some hours.

"Well, I don't mind," I said, speaking as brightly as I could, though I was getting very wet and cold and stiff, and rather — well, rather quivery at the thought

## 106 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

of Gerald, sitting in his office in London, with no thought of the plight in which his poor wife was! "I shall feel like a real sailor when I get back. But I'm afraid poor mamma won't!"

I noticed that Sir Arnold made no reply to this, and suddenly it struck me as rather odd that she had sent me no message when she found the waves breaking over the yacht.

In much less heavy weather than this I have heard her little scream, and I have been inundated with entreaties, sent by her through the steward, that I would go below and keep myself warm and dry.

I made up my mind, therefore, though it was now a difficult and even a dangerous business, that I would crawl along the deck and go to her and see how she was. I began to be afraid that alarm and sea-sickness had made her very ill indeed, as it is not at all like mamma to be quiet for a long time together.

Sir Arnold tried once more to induce me to remain where I was, but his own voice was rather hoarse and broken, and I think he was not so much occupied with us at that moment as with himself.

It was with the greatest difficulty that I got along, holding on tightly and helped by one of the sailors, to the companion, where I lurched downstairs, and flung myself headlong into the cabin.

"Mamma!" cried I. "Mamma!"

But there was no answer, and at the same moment a terrific wave dashed over the yacht, darkening the port-holes and making the vessel quiver from end to end.

"Mamma!" I almost shrieked.

Still there was no answer, and I was just going to rush back on deck to ask what had become of her, when the sailor who had helped me down appeared at

the foot of the companion-ladder, and, touching his hat, said:

"Beg pardon, my lady. But Lady Rushbury she didn't stay aboard. She got off and went ashore again afore we started."

"Oh, no, it's not possible!" I cried indignantly.

"Aye, my lady. Sir Arnold can tell you. She went acrost the big yawl afore we shoved off."

I sank down, or rather, I was thrown down by another shock from a wave, and I felt sick and cold and half dead with horror and distress.

That mamma, that my own mother, should have deserted me like this, just because she was afraid of a shaking, seemed too shocking a thing to be at once realized.

Of course, I knew that she had not believed in the existence of actual danger, that she had been only anxious to avoid being sea-sick. But surely she ought to have warned me of what she was going to do, and not have run away and left me without a word!

Did Sir Arnold know what she was going to do?

I could not, however, give much time to thoughts of this kind, as the actual danger we were in now gave us enough to occupy our minds. There could be no doubt that we were in peril, for the sea was running mountains high, and the storm, instead of showing any signs of passing, appeared to grow in violence every moment.

All thought of mamma's defection soon disappeared in my consideration of our plight; and, thinking the only thing to do was to keep out of everybody's way and prepare to die calmly if I had to die, I remained in the cabin, trembling all over and very cold, trying hard to fortify myself against what might have to be endured.

## 108 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

It is only the truth to say that for hours we thought we should never reach the shore alive; every wave that broke over us threatened to sink us, and when at last, after waiting for the turn of the tide, we got near to Dieppe Harbor again, it was only to discover that it was impossible to attempt to enter until the wind had gone down.

The night had come on, and we could see the lights of the town through the mist; and although the danger grew less as the wind lessened in violence, we had a weary and anxious time of it, as we beat about, waiting for an opportunity to enter the harbor, and keeping a sharp look-out at the same time.

It was not until five o'clock in the morning that we at last succeeded, after having put off to sea again as the safer place, in making the harbor.

When, wet through and so cold that I could scarcely open my mouth to speak, I tottered across the quay towards the hotel, supported by Sir Arnold on one side and by a sailor on the other, I had no feeling or thought but one of thankfulness that we had got back alive.

And then I remember, as we waited for the hotel people to come down and let me in, I wondered, as I looked at Sir Arnold, whether I was looking as ridiculous in his eyes as he did in mine, with his little features all pinched and blue and red with the cold, and with a stream of sea-water still trickling down his sou'wester on to his little nose!

I found that mamma had gone to bed, but I woke her up with something very like a slap, and did not scruple to reproach her roundly with her desertion.

Sleepy as she was, mamma had her answer ready, as usual.

"My dear child," she said, as she offered her warm

cheek for a very brief kiss, "how on earth should I have guessed that you meant to stay out all night?"

She threw this at me as a reproach, and I took her up sharply.

"Stay out all night! We only stayed out all night because we couldn't get in!"

"Well, you are in now, so what is there to make a fuss about?" she demanded in an aggrieved tone.

"I might have been drowned, we might all have been!" I said irrelevantly.

She sat up in bed with a resigned air, seeing that I did not mean to go as yet.

"Drowned!" echoed mamma, as if such an expression connected with the sea were unheard of. "Drowned! How might you have been drowned?"

"Why, it was because you saw the sea was rough, and you were afraid yourself, that you left us," I said sharply.

"Nothing of the sort," said mamma decidedly. "I thought by the strength of the wind that we should be out too long for me to be able to make myself decent in time for dinner."

I looked at her, stupefied. Really I am not at all sure that this was not the truth. Still, it did not exculpate her.

"And when you found that we didn't come back, and that you had left me alone in actual danger, you could go to bed!" I gasped out.

"Well, dear, it was ever so late before I did go to bed," said she. "And then only because I knew I couldn't do you any good by staying up. I should only have been cross when you did come if I had sat up."

"It seemed probable that we should never be able to come back at all," said I solemnly.

But mamma would not admit that.

"Don't be ridiculous, Cecilia," she said. "Sir Arnold's sailors are all experienced men, and if they can't keep a boat afloat, I don't know who can."

It was useless to argue with her that ships have been known to go down in a storm, even when there were none but old hands aboard her; or that a small yacht is not built for weather such as that we had been out in. She finished the matter quite calmly by smiling, and saying brightly:

"I'm quite sure Sir Arnold would never have let you go out in weather unfit for his yacht."

I sat down stupidly by the bedside. When I was on the boat I had felt full of spirit and dogged energy, little as there was for me to do but to close my teeth and keep quiet. Now that I was safe, I felt a great weariness stealing over my limbs, as well as a great oppression upon my spirits.

Mamma, who wanted to get rid of me and to go to sleep again, stared at me petulantly.

"What's the matter with you?" she said. "Are you worrying about what people will say?"

I uttered a little cry. Out there on the yacht, when one expected each moment to go to the bottom with the little craft, there was no time to worry oneself about matters of propriety. Now, however, that the matter was put to me in this crude way by mamma, it did occur to me, with most unpleasant force, that I, who had been so anxious to be a pattern of discretion, was in great danger of being looked upon as very much the reverse.

"If there is any gossip, it's all through you, Mamma," I said shortly.

And then, rather than stay to listen to her wounded cries of remonstrance and indignation, I went out of



the room, staggering as if the boat were still swaying and rocking under me.

I found Lindsay crying, and it cut me to the heart to find that my maid had been passing the night between the hotel and the pier-head, weeping and worrying everybody she met about me, while my own mother was tucked up peacefully in bed!

I slept heavily, and then got up and had breakfast by myself, and sat down to write a long letter to Gerald, to tell him all about it before anybody else can get hold of it and tell him a garbled version of the story.

And then, as I am restless and I think a little feverish, and as I don't want to have to see people this morning and to talk to them, I sat down and wrote this in my diary.

It was the most dreadful thing that has ever happened to me, and I shall never forget it!

DIEPPE,

August 16th.

I KNEW that my adventure would have unpleasant consequences! In the first place, I haven't been well since, and I have had to have the doctor. He is a most horrid old Frenchman, and he makes me furious by believing, and by showing me that he believes, that I meant to go with Sir Arnold on a cruise by myself, and that only the rough weather brought us back to Dieppe. I shouldn't mind this old idiot thinking so, if he chose, but that I can't help wondering whether he is only repeating the story that is going about.

I see mamma as little as I can help, and I won't let any of her friends visit me. So I am keeping up the pretense of illness — it is not so very much more than a pretense — as long as I can, and remaining in my own room.

The worst of it is that that little idiot, Sir Arnold Banbury, seems to think that this incident ought to be a link to bind us together in the intimacy of the closest friends, and he will leave flowers and notes for me every day. I give the flowers to Lindsay, and I burn the notes conspicuously in her presence, after having mastered just enough of them to see that he can't spell, and that he delights in such phrases as "our marvelous escape from a watery grave." Really, he ought to write for the *Daily Wonder*.

I am sorry to say that Gerald is not at all pleased. I knew he would not be. He wants me to come home, and he says if I am not home by the end of the week

he shall come and fetch me. So I shall go back, for I don't think it would be advisable for him to come here. I am sure he would quarrel with mamma, or, if not, he would say something she would never forget or forgive, and I don't quite know what he might say to poor little Sir Arnold, who is, I am sure, wholly blameless about this. He may have seen mamma go off the yacht — though he swears he did not — but, at any rate, he never expected to be out all night with me tossing on the sea!

I shall go home to-morrow.

CURZON STREET,

*August 28th.*

HOME again! Gerald not at all nice, and less likely than ever to confide to me how things are going with Sir John and Harriet.

He says I shall never again go away with my mother, and really I am not surprised at that. I told him I had made up my mind on that point myself, but he was not at all mollified. He said that, even if I had a frivolous mother, I ought by this time to know how to prevent letting her become a danger to me.

I began to cry, and though he was kind and told me not to worry myself about it any more, but to be more careful another time, I can see that he is really very much displeased, and indeed I can't wonder at that.

We are going to Folkestone for a fortnight, so that he may have a change. He hates Folkestone, and so do I; nothing to do but to walk up and down those bare, scorching Leas listening to a band that always plays the same things, and that, when for once it has something one wants to hear down on its programme, invariably plays instead "by request"—of the conductor—some wretched waltz by the conductor himself!

FOLKESTONE,

*September 10th.*

WE have been here six horrid days, and nothing happened till yesterday, when I was out by myself in the morning. I had been into a shop to buy a book, and when I came out I ran into — Harriet!

She was looking handsomer than ever, in a perfectly sweet pale green linen dress, with a big black hat trimmed with scarlet poppies and golden wheat-ears.

"Harriet!" I cried.

Before I could say another word she had seized me and kissed me effusively. She was looking radiant, and I thought at once that everything must be all right with her.

"My dear Cis!" she said, and then she stood back and looked at me slyly, and laughed a little. "How are you, after your adventure?"

I grew very red and stammered a little. I had, indeed, heard a good deal more than I cared about concerning that miserable business, but not until now had I realized to the full the insinuations which were being made about it.

"Do you mean my nearly being drowned?" I asked.

"I mean your being out all night with Sir Arnold Banbury on his yacht, dear," lisped out Harriet smoothly. "I have felt so dreadfully sorry for you! It is annoying, isn't it, to think that such a horrid experience as that should have to be gone through, and then that one should hear gossip about it wherever one goes instead of getting sympathy!"

"I have heard no gossip," I said coldly.

"Haven't you? Well, *I* have! And I was very glad to have an opportunity of showing you what I mean by standing by a friend by the way I took it."

"And pray how did you take it?" I asked ironically.

"I told everybody that I was quite sure Aunt Vi was asked to go too, and that she funked it when she saw how rough the sea was."

"Mamma was on the yacht," I said angrily. "Actually on it, and she got off again and ran away because she was afraid of the rough sea."

Harriet looked at me with triumph which was half malicious.

"I was sure of it," she said in a tone which showed she did not believe me. "And you never saw her get off!"

"Of course I didn't, or I should have got off too."

"Yes. And didn't Sir Arnold see her either?"

"I'm sure I don't know. And it wouldn't have mattered two straws if he had. Nobody in his senses would suppose that I should run away with a little fellow who comes up to my shoulder."

"Really, Cis, I didn't expect you to put it like that," said she. "I certainly shouldn't have liked to make such a suggestion myself."

"You seemed to suggest that other people have said so," I said. "However, it doesn't matter, because everybody who knows me knows how absurd it is to make a fuss about such a thing."

Harriet raised her eyebrows.

"What!" she said. "I thought one couldn't be too careful or too particular. You are the last person I expected to find making light of such an adventure, Cis."

"I didn't make light of it at the time, I assure you.

When one believes that the next moment will be one's last, and when that belief goes on for about half a dozen hours, there is nothing in the least like making light of it to be done."

"Well, I am glad you got off so well. It will make you careful how you speak unkindly of other women who get themselves into scrapes," she said.

"I haven't got myself into any scrape," I said.

"Didn't Mr. Calstock mind, then?"

I hesitated. I couldn't honestly say that Gerald did not mind, but at the same time I was angry with her for making this pretense that there was anything analogous in her case to mine.

"He was very angry with my mother for leaving me on the yacht by myself," I said, "and very thankful that I got safely back again."

Harriet sighed deeply.

"I wish all husbands were as kind!" she said.

Then I think she saw that she was irritating me too much, and was afraid I might say something "nasty," for she went on:

"Where are you staying, dear?"

I named the hotel where we were, and she shrugged her shoulders.

"Lucky girl! Of course, expense is no object with you!" she said. "I am in lodgings—such lodgings! The English seaside apartments at their worst! But I'm with old Aunt Vera, and we thought it more discreet to stay in rooms than to go to an hotel. Lodgings are so beastly that they make one feel 'good.'"

And she made the funniest little grimace as she walked on, telling me I should see her again by and by.

I told Gerald of the meeting, and he expressed surprise.

"I thought she was still at Fouroaks," he said.

And by that I knew that he was still in correspondence with Sir John about her.

We drove out in the afternoon, and when we got back to the hotel we found Harriet waiting for us among the palms near the entrance. She was dressed from head to foot in the palest gray, and looked better, I think, than I had ever seen her look.

Gerald caught sight of her first, and, turning to me, he said:

"What a striking-looking woman!"

"Where?" said I.

And then my eyes followed the direction of his.

"Why, don't you know? It's Harriet Usher!" I said.

He uttered an exclamation of astonishment, and the next moment Harriet had come forward, all smiles and radiance, and was holding out her hand to Gerald, after effusively kissing me.

"Mr. Calstock, I *know* it must be," she said, as he shook hands, and tried to be very solemn and dry.

But he found it hard to maintain the stiff, professional manner which she had left him no time to assume, and a few minutes later we were all sitting in the lounge over our tea, and chatting and laughing as if no danger hung over Harriet, and as if Gerald had not been the solicitor whom her husband was employing to find out what he wanted to know about her.

It was a most comical situation, while at the same time it was an embarrassing one, and Gerald would have avoided it if he could.

But Harriet can be very clever when she chooses, and having once got her grip, she held on.

That is to say, she contrived, by insinuating that she was very lonely, and that her Aunt Vera had gone out to see some friends and left her by herself, to force



us into giving her an invitation to dine with us that evening.

Half-hearted as this invitation undoubtedly was, she seized upon it at once, and we found ourselves her hosts for the evening.

I could not help seeing that she was making a strong impression upon Gerald. I remembered, with sudden vividness, his saying to me that the haggard ladies of Burne-Jones's pictures, with their lean cheeks, long necks, red-gold hair, and drooping figures had a certain fascination for him. And as I watched Harriet talking to him, and noted the cleverness with which she showed herself to the best advantage, both as to person and manner, I felt almost jealous of the admiration which she undoubtedly excited in him.

From civil he became sympathetic; and although the conversation we carried on never touched upon the subjects most interesting to all of us, enough was said for me to realize what a very strong attraction Harriet could exercise even upon a man who had begun by having a prejudice against her.

When we had sat in the lounge quite a long time after dinner over our coffee, and then had strolled out on the Leas to listen to the music which we all hate, but which seems to be the only thing we cannot avoid here, Harriet told us that she really must go back and see whether Lady Vera had come home yet.

We offered to see her to the door of the house, but she said I looked tired, and suggested that we should all go back to our hotel first.

"Then," she said, "I can walk back by myself."

Of course, Gerald would not hear of this, but said he would accompany her. I felt vaguely uneasy, but I knew that I should only make myself ridiculous by

raising any objection, so it was Harriet's plan that was carried out.

I was "dropped" at our hotel, and Harriet and Gerald went out together.

I went upstairs and stood at the window, and from there I could see Harriet's light gray hat, and could note that they were walking more and more slowly. Even when they were quite a long way off I could still make them out in the darkness because of Harriet's slender gray figure; and I saw that when they had gone some distance they turned back again, and that they turned two or three times before they disappeared.

Knowing Harriet, I felt pretty certain that she was making the best possible use of this opportunity of getting, as she would have said, "into the enemy's camp," and I supposed that she must be stating her own side of the case between her husband and herself, and doing her best to enlist Gerald's sympathies on her side.

It was perfectly natural, entirely justifiable, and yet I did not like it.

I waited for Gerald's return, feeling uneasy, restless, miserable. Why I scarcely knew. But Harriet is so very clever where her own interests are concerned, and is troubled with so few scruples, that I could not help feeling some anxiety both as to what she would say about herself and what she would say about me.

She affected to think yesterday, when I met her so unexpectedly, that there was more in my adventure at Dieppe than there really was. Would she try to insinuate something of the kind to Gerald at the same time that she tried to minimize the importance of her own differences with Sir John?

While knowing that I had no reasons to give in

support of my suspicions, I felt more and more uneasy as it grew late, and still Gerald did not return.

When at last he came back he was moody and thoughtful, and he was, or I fancied that he was, rather short and curt in his manner to me. This does happen sometimes when he is very tired, but it made me uneasy that it should happen now.

"Well, what do you think of Harriet, now you have seen her?" I ventured to ask when we were alone.

He answered slowly:

"I think she is a very clever woman."

"Clever! Oh, yes, and charming, too, isn't she?"

"I should imagine that some men might find her very charming."

"Oh, Gerald, didn't you think her so, too?"

"Well, yes, but perhaps I knew too much to be so susceptible as I might otherwise have been."

Considering the open way in which he had been devoting his attention to her, I was rendered uneasy by these words. Why should he now try to pretend that he did not admire her very much, when it was patent to the meanest powers of observation that he did?

In the face of his answer, respecting Gerald as I do, I did not dare to say anything more. But I have been uneasy ever since, and I can't help seeing that this meeting with Harriet has made a great difference in him.

He has been recalled by it to his business, which I had done my hardest to put out of his mind for a few days, and now he is anxious to go back to town and to start work again.

That is all he says, but I am wondering whether it means that he wants to see Sir John again.

I wonder whether he has been induced by Harriet

to believe that she is the injured victim she poses as being! I wonder whether he will try to reconcile her and Sir John! Of course, it would be much better if he could, and Harriet would be very grateful to him. But — I wonder whether it would be a good thing after all, and whether Harriet is really so much to be pitied as she says she is!

CURZON STREET,  
September 15th.

WE are back home again.

I don't know what has become of Harriet, or whether she left Folkestone before us or not. At any rate I haven't seen her again.

I don't know whether Gerald saw her again, but he said nothing about it if he did. I called once at her lodgings, but was told she was out, and when I called again that she had gone away.

In the meantime I have not heard from her, so at present I am quite in the dark as to what is going to happen with regard to her.

I feel rather shy of speaking much about her to Gerald, who is inclined to be short in his answers when I do, and to look upon my questions as trenching too much upon his business affairs to be in my province.

I haven't been near mamma since I came back from Dieppe. I have not forgiven her yet for her behavior about the *Lucette*.

Sir Arnold has called, but I was out. I shall take care to be always out to him, as I don't want to have any more gossip.

CURZON STREET,

*September 17th.*

SOMETHING rather worrying happened to-day. Papa came this morning and stayed to luncheon. He was looking very brown and jolly, and he says he is only up in town for a day, as he is going back to some moor which he and two other men have hired for the season.

He showed great concern about my adventure, and he too had heard gossip, and he was very angry with mamma. He said I should get myself talked about if I didn't take care, and that I was too pretty to do such harum-scarum things.

"You don't want people to talk about you as they do about Harriet Usher, do you?" he ended.

I asked him what had become of Harriet, and he said he hadn't heard, and that whatever happened to her would be too good for her.

I was surprised to hear good-natured papa speak so strongly, and he explained, rather to my dismay, that she was one of those women whom nobody could trust, and that Sir John had got a very bad bargain when he married her, and would be well rid of her if he could get his divorce.

I said as little as possible after that, and was glad he had not heard about my share in shielding Harriet. I said what I could for her, however, briefly, so as not to fall into further discussion, but he shut me up peremptorily, and told me he didn't want to hear me taking her part.

That frightened me, for papa is not ill-natured. Then when the subject dropped, he told me what a dreadfully bad year he had had, and said he hoped I could help him a little, and that he had come to town in the hope that I could.

When I told him that I should have to ask Gerald before I could give him any money, he seemed annoyed, and said it was a very foolish thing of me to let myself be dependent upon my husband for every shilling.

"Oh, Papa, I'm not," I said. "But it was my own choice to have only enough to go with in my account in my own name, and my trip to Dieppe with mamma nearly ran me out."

He frowned at that.

"With your mother! Oh, yes, I can quite understand that," he said. "She would run through a balance in shorter time than anybody I know. Well, can you do anything for me, or not?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "Come round again to-morrow morning, or tell me where to send it, and how much you want."

"A couple of hundred will do, my dear, if you are short yourself," he said. "And you'd better send it to me. I'm at the old place, the hotel where I always stay in town. I suppose you couldn't let me have it this morning?" he added after a short pause.

"Oh, yes, I can; I'll go at once to the office and see Gerald about it," I said.

Papa always frowns when I mention Gerald's name, although he is his client. But I fancy he doesn't put so much of his business in the firm's hands now that Gerald is his son-in-law.

I went upstairs and put my hat on at once, and papa and I got into a taxi to go to the office. He

said he wouldn't come up, he would wait for me at the end of the street.

So I went in alone and asked to see Mr. Calstock; but instead of showing me into his office they told me there was a client with him, and showed me into another room to wait. Then the clerk went to tell Gerald I was waiting.

After a few minutes I heard the door of Gerald's private office open, and some one come out. I heard no voices, and only a light tread, so that I guessed the client was a lady.

I did not give that a second thought, for I was busily rehearsing the words I should use, knowing that my husband would be displeased at papa's wanting more money again so soon.

However, when the door opened, it was not the clerk who came in, but Gerald himself.

"What's the matter?" he asked rather shortly. "Why couldn't you telephone if you wanted anything?"

I went up to him coaxingly.

"Don't be angry, Gerald," I said pleadingly. "I couldn't very well say what I had to say into the telephone."

"What is it then?"

"It's papa. He — well, he wants a little money. Only a little. And I haven't enough in my account, after what I drew out yesterday to pay Madame Anastasie for my dresses."

"Oh, well, all right," said he, more amiably than I had expected. "How much do you want?"

"Two hundred."

"Very well. I'll write you out a cheque. But you will have to tell him you can't let him have any more before Christmas."



"Oh, I can't tell him that. After all, I've been spending a great deal on myself lately," I pleaded.

Again he took it better than I expected, and only smiled.

"Well, it's your own money, and I suppose you must waste it as you please," said he.

"Don't cross it," I said.

"It is crossed."

"Well, write 'Pay bearer' on it," said I, knowing that papa wanted the cash at once to go away with.

Again Gerald was amiable, and did as I asked him to, and then I gave him a kiss and went out.

I found papa at the door of the taxicab, looking very much ruffled.

"What's the matter, Papa? I've got the money for you," I said, as he held open the door for me to get in.

He grunted, and did not even then seem at all pleased.

"Do you know who that was that was in the office when you went in?" he asked.

"No. Who was it?"

"Your precious cousin, Harriet Usher."

I sat back in the cab, cold and trembling. But I would not harbor the ugly thoughts that tried to come in.

"Well, what if it was Harriet?" I asked, though in rather an unsteady voice. "Her husband is one of Gerald's clients, you know."

"Yes, but she isn't," said he shortly. "And what I want to know is, what was she doing in your husband's office?"

"She was there on business, of course," I said, trying to speak as if surprised at his tone.

"Oh, yes, trust her for that. But what sort of business? What could have taken her to him?"

"She wants him to intercede for her with Sir John," I said firmly.

Papa shook his head.

"Well, if you don't mind, I suppose I ought not to," he said. "But to tell you the truth, I look upon that woman as a sort of stormy petrel, and I think that she brings trouble wherever she goes."

I tried to laugh, though indeed I did not feel merry.

"I'll ask Gerald to-night what it was that she came to him about," I said.

"And he won't tell you," said papa shortly.

I wish papa wouldn't say those things. They are not true, because I know I can trust Gerald. And he must answer my question to-night.

CURZON STREET,

*September 18th.*

I DID ask Gerald last night when he came back from the office, what Harriet had had to say to him when she called upon him. I spoke as carelessly as I could, as if I had known all the time, when I was at the office, that she was there too.

I don't know whether my question surprised him; he is too much of a lawyer to let one see those things.

He answered at once that she came to ask him to intercede for her with her husband.

I felt much relieved to hear that, although, indeed, I had known that that was the reason of her visit.

I tried to shake off the unpleasant impression made by papa's words. After all, if the wife of a man in any profession were to be jealous of every attractive woman her husband met in the way of business, neither his life nor hers would be worth living.

But before the evening was over I perceived clearly enough that there was something in poor papa's warning about Harriet.

Although Gerald was angry about the yachting adventure, and although he had expressed great annoyance at my having been out on the boat without mamma, he took the right view when I told him about it, and put all the blame of the adventure upon mamma.

But last night he brought up the subject again quite unexpectedly while we were at dinner, and, looking across the table at me with that keen glance of his that one can't meet when one has anything to hide, he asked abruptly:

"Does that fellow Banbury ever call here?"

I recognized at once the hand of Harriet in this speech, and it was anger and disgust with her, and not any feeling of embarrassment about Sir Arnold, that made me redden and draw myself up, and answer coldly:

"Yes, he does call sometimes, I believe. But I am never at home to him."

"Why not?" asked Gerald shortly.

I was taken aback, when I thought I had made the answer he would have liked best.

"Why not?" I stammered. "Why—why, why should I see him? I don't want to see him. I had a most horrid, horrid adventure with him, and—I—I don't want to be reminded of it."

All the time that I spoke Gerald's eyes were fixed upon me in a way that I resented. He seemed to be suspicious, watchful. It was not fair, or right. And I could have burst out crying at the thought that this woman, my own cousin, whom I had done my best to help and befriend in the difficulties she had brought upon herself, should be the person to try to embroil me with my own husband.

"It would be much wiser, I should have thought," said Gerald, still in the same curt way, "to have seen him as you do other people. It would be less likely to cause gossip."

"What gossip?" I asked indignantly.

"Well, such an adventure is likely to cause scandal," he said. "I don't mean for a moment to say that it was your fault. It was not. Still, it was a great pity it happened, and you ought to be extra careful how you behave afterwards."

"I'm sorry I didn't know before what your wishes were about my receiving Sir Arnold," I said, very

haughtily. "And I am sorry, also, that you condescend to listen to the suggestions of another woman about me."

I was sorry the moment I had said this. It was mean and petty and showed me to be jealous, when I had tried so hard not to be. But indeed, I felt greatly hurt at his reviving the subject of the adventure with Sir Arnold, which had been very painful to me from beginning to end.

Gerald looked at me steadily, in a way that put me more in the wrong than ever.

"You need not take any notice of the suggestions unless you like," he said dryly.

I said nothing, and the matter dropped. But he went straight from the dining-room to his study after dinner, ordering his coffee to be sent in to him.

I sat by myself in the drawing-room for a little while, and then I decided upon a bold move. It was not usual for me to interrupt him at his work, but I felt that, if I were not to make an effort now, I might let the rift grow wide.

I had a strong consciousness that, although it was unwise of me to show jealousy, there was real cause for it. Harriet is a very attractive woman, and I know that she is not over-scrupulous; I may put it like that without ill-nature. And mamma has said a great deal to me, at different times, about the way in which every man is dominated by a type; she says, for instance, that if you find a man attracted by a woman with blue eyes and fair hair, you may reckon upon blue eyes and fair hair, of the same color but in different individuals, having an attraction for him to the end of his life. I don't know whether this is true, but as Gerald has admitted that he admires hazel eyes and copper-colored hair combined with slimness

of figure, and as he was certainly attracted by Harriet's appearance before he knew who she was, I must be prepared to find that she has some influence with him already.

The thought made me sore and bitter.

They have all taunted me so cruelly, first in one way and then in another, not with open gibes, of course, but in little pin-pricks that hurt as much as bigger ones, with my marriage "outside my own rank," that at least they might leave me to my husband and not try to make mischief between us!

When I married Gerald, the whole family, including Harriet, treated me as if I were making a great sacrifice, "throwing myself away," and marrying beneath me.

Yet they won't leave me alone, and let me be happy with my husband in my own way, but they must interfere, now in one way and now in another, and spoil my life if they can.

Yet I have done my best for all of them; I have helped papa and mamma, and kept Harriet's secret and interceded for her with Gerald.

Why should I be made everybody's scapegoat? Why should I be drawn into dangerous adventures by my mother, rendered jealous by my father, and, worst of all, find a little wedge of discord between myself and my husband inserted by the very woman I have risked a good deal to help?

I was feeling so miserable and so excited that I did not dare to go to Gerald at once, as I wanted to be calm and sweet to him, and to use the soft tongue with him.

When at last I knocked at the study door, it was ten o'clock.

I got no answer, though I knocked again and again, and at last I opened the door and looked in. The

lamp was out, and Gerald was not there. It was with a sense of horrible depression that I went back to the drawing-room. On the way I met Jackson, who told me that Gerald had gone out about nine.

It was as much as I could do not to burst out crying before the man when he told me this. But, of course, I didn't; I pretended to remember that Gerald had to go out, and smiled and went on to the drawing-room. But I never felt so utterly heartbroken in all my life, not even in the days of my marriage with Sir Lionel.

After all, in those days I didn't expect anything but slights and neglect, and, indeed, I preferred neglect to my husband's attention. But now that I am married to the man of my own heart, to the man whom I not only love, but respect and admire above all other men in the world, it does seem horribly, horribly hard to have to submit to such a slight as this!

Surely, even if I was rather petulant at dinner-time, he need not have punished me so severely as by going out without a word to me!

I suppose it is, after all, a little thing to worry myself about. But I cannot help thinking that, taken in conjunction with other little things, it means a good deal.

What shall I do?

If any one had told me, at the time of my marriage with Gerald, that within a few months I should be wanting advice as to how to deal with him, how I should have laughed at the idea!

I should have said that, in marrying him, I had given myself into the care of the very wisest as well as the kindest man I knew, and that I should never want any advice but his in any crisis of my life.

And yet here I am — so soon too! — already wondering where to turn for comfort and counsel.

I am sure that Gerald is keeping some secret from me, and I am terribly, terribly afraid, although I am not quite so sure of that as I am of the other, that that secret concerns Harriet.

I know, while I write this, that it is only an instinct, and that all the trifles that trouble me do not amount to anything like *proof* of what I fear. But a woman's instincts are trustworthy guides, whatever people may say, and I know that I am in danger of losing all that I most prize in the world!

I had not been in the drawing-room by myself more than half an hour when Gerald came in, and saying nothing about having been out, told me I looked tired and ought to go to bed.

Then I smiled and said I had been to the study, but could not get an answer from him.

"Were you out," I asked, as playfully as I could, "without telling me you were going?"

"I only went to post a letter," he said. "I never trust the posting of important letters to servants."

I hesitated. I knew that he had been away a whole hour. He looked at me keenly, and frowned.

I suppose he guessed that I knew how long he had been away, for he said rather petulantly:

"I met some one I know and had to walk a mile with him before he would let me go. Now, is your curiosity satisfied?"

"Yes, quite."

It was not true, but I was too glad to see him smile at me again, and speak in his usual affectionate tone, to worry him into irritation with further questions.

But I have been wondering ever since to whom he was writing that important letter that could not be trusted to a servant!



CURZON STREET,

*September 19th.*

GERALD is going away for the week-end "on business." I wish I dared ask where he is going, but I know that, if I were to ask, he wouldn't tell me. If he intended me to know, he would have told me of his own accord.

I am growing wretched. Surely he must see it!

CURZON STREET,

*September 20th.*

SUCH a pleasant surprise I had to-day! I had finished luncheon, all by myself as usual, and was just going upstairs to get ready to go out in the car to pay some horrid duty calls, when a carriage drove up, and I recognized old Lady Langbourne's old-fashioned liveries.

I was delighted, although I was trembling with nervousness as to what she might have to tell me, as she is an inveterate gossip, and knows more scandal than — there is any ground for.

She greeted me very affectionately, and without any unnecessary compliments.

"Well, my dear, you see I haven't lost much time in coming to see you," she said, as she kissed me. Then she drew back to get my face into focus, and cried out abruptly: "Good gracious, child, what have you been doing with yourself? Where are your pretty looks gone to?"

I laughed, and tried to remonstrate, but I had hard work to keep back the tears. Of course, Lady Langbourne jumped to the very conclusion I would have had her avoid:

"Ah, these mixed marriages, my dear! They never answer," she said, delighted to be able to preach a sermon upon one of her favorite texts.

I couldn't help laughing at the expression.

"Mine wasn't a mixed marriage," I said. "My husband is a dear."

"Oh, well, dear, you ought to know best, and if he likes a plain wife better than a pretty one, of course he's going the right way to get what he wants."

"Do I look so dreadful then?" I asked, rather alarmed.

"Well, I don't want to be unkind, I'm too old! But you don't look like the same woman who came down to Cowes in July, all dimples and smiles and rosy cheeks. Come now, tell me what has gone wrong."

I only wished I dared! But of course I did not. I sat down on the sofa beside her and made up stories about toothache and colds, to all of which she shook her head.

"If I were one of your modern young women, instead of an ancient, old one," she said, after listening and watching me very attentively, "I should just say, 'Rot!' Of course, as it is, I am much too proper to say anything so rude. But come now, don't you think you would be all the better for a change?"

"I can't get one yet," I said. "My husband has to go away on business at the end of the week—"

"Ah! There's our opportunity," cried she. "You shall come down to me. I've taken quite a nice old place on the river for the autumn, and we are trying to forget there that we haven't had any summer. Put your nightgown in your bag on Saturday morning, and come down to 'Abbot's Barn' till Tuesday."

"I should love it," cried I.

And I meant it. The thought of being once more among all those merry, frivolous, naughty people, who do as they please, and never trouble their heads as to whether that happens to be right or wrong, is joy after the misgivings and doubts, the worries and questionings, I have been through lately.

She peered at me through her double eyeglass.

"You mustn't mind being told by the women that you are a perfect fright, you know, my dear," she said encouragingly when she had examined me narrowly. "The men, naturally, will be more polite. I shall get Sir Arnold to come down—"

"No, don't, please," said I, hastily.

"Oh, but I must. He's perfectly miserable because you won't see him, and he's such a dear, harmless little fellow that there's no sense in being so unkind to him. Especially after what you went through together on that dreadful night off the coast of France. Where was it? Trouville?"

"Dieppe," said I, feeling that my cheeks were burning.

"Oh, yes. I read about it. I suppose your husband was dreadfully angry?"

"He was vexed, of course. But he saw that it wasn't my fault."

"Of course it wasn't. How could either of you guess that the wind would change and keep you out all night?"

"My mother was on board the yacht," I said quickly.

Lady Langbourne did not believe me, but on the other hand, it was evident that she did not think it mattered.

"People won't believe that," she said simply. "But yachts are nasty things at any time. You never can tell what they're going to do next. I think the railway's safer. Of course, on the other hand, even a yacht is better than a motor-car. There's nothing so damaging as a smash in which the owner is described as 'accompanied by a lady'!"

I wanted to explain, and I wished she wouldn't take

it like that. But there is no stopping Lady Langbourne, and no persuading her. One must just listen and assent if one can. If not, the utmost one can do is to shake one's head, which gives her, generally, a fresh impulse to go on.

I ventured to say, "Oh, don't!" and she smiled.

"Well, well, it wasn't so bad as that. Still, my dear, a young married woman can't be too careful, especially when she's pretty. And you will soon be handsome again when you have been down among us for a few week-ends. Happiness is the secret of good looks, and we'll make you happy. Everybody is always happy with me. By the bye, what has become of your cousin, Lady Usher? Charming woman, but indiscreet, most indiscreet. I hope it isn't true that she's quarreled with her husband. Somebody told me something about it, and said they were separated. If so, at least they've had the good sense to keep it out of the newspapers. I always think the lowest depths of ill-breeding are reached when people let their affairs become the subject of headlines in the evening papers. 'Scandal in High Life!' Ugh!"

And Lady Langbourne shuddered.

"Well, if people marry people they don't care for, scandals are bound to follow," said I.

She smiled with superior wisdom.

"Oh, no, they're not," she said with conviction. "Scandals come of beginning the world with wrong views of life. If you marry, believing that your husband will care for you all your life as much as he did when he first married you, and if you mean to be miserable if he doesn't, then it is that a rupture and exposure and all the rest must come."

"But why should they?" I said stoutly. "Why should you marry at all if you don't love?"

"My dear, marriage is the link that binds society together, and the looser the link the more likely it is to hold till the end of the chapter. Love and marriage are two different things. I respect both, but I deplore the tendency to mix them up."

I could not help laughing, although I was by no means sure that she was not wholly in earnest, in spite of the twinkle in her eye.

"I'm afraid you can't respect me then, Lady Langbourne, for I'm still very much in love with my husband," I said.

"Very well, my dear. If you are both of the same mind, there's no harm in it. Only I can't say that conjugal bliss is becoming to you. Well, what about Saturday? Will you come?"

"I should love to," I said.

I had been thinking it over while she rattled on, and I came to the conclusion that it would be a good thing for Sir Arnold and me to meet in such publicity as that of Lady Langbourne's house-party. It would be seen at once what terms we were on, and afterwards we could meet more easily, conscious that the worst shock of scandal was over.

I felt rather sorry for the poor little man, who has never done anything to alarm or offend me, and whom I quite like. I know he was just as miserable as I was over the yacht adventure, and sorry on my account; and as for his flowers and his notes, they were merely the only means he could think of, of showing how sorry he was.

I felt quite cheered up by Lady Langbourne's liveliness, and I was very glad that she had lost sight of the topic of Harriet, while she wandered on into

something else. I am so very heartsore on that subject that I am afraid of "giving myself away" when it is under discussion.

I don't think Gerald was displeased when I told him about Lady Langbourne's invitation; but he could not well refuse his permission for me to go, and, as a matter of fact, he did not refuse. So to-morrow we both go away, he "on business," and I—on pleasure, for the week-end.

“ABBOT’S BARN,”

*Sunday night.*

WHO would have thought, when I came away from town yesterday morning, that I should come into fresh worry and unhappiness here?

Yet I am more unhappy than when I left Curzon Street, and I am wondering how it will all end!

It was lovely at first. When I reached the station there were half a dozen motors and carriages to meet the people coming down, and Lady Langbourne’s niece met me and a batch of friends and packed us into the carriages that were to take us to the house, which is quite close to the river.

Sir Arnold had motored down from town in his own car, and I was quite amused to see his delight on meeting me. I am at least thankful to see that he did not appear to notice that awful change for the worse in my looks about which Lady Langbourne so kindly told me.

We were a very merry party at luncheon, which was served in a long room with a low ceiling, which was, perhaps, once the refectory of some old monks.

On the other hand, perhaps it wasn’t, for nobody appears to know anything about the “Abbot” or his “barn.”

We went on the river during the afternoon, I on a steam-launch with Lady Langbourne and two more old ladies. This was the discretion about which she talked to me so earnestly when she came to Curzon Street.



It was very nice, and though a shower came on, we were too well provided with wraps to get wet, although I sat out on deck all the time, instead of going into the little cabin. Lady Langbourne's voice is so penetrating that I dreaded it in such a confined space, so I made the excuse of a headache to stay outside.

Dinner was another merry affair, and afterwards we danced in the long ballroom, built out from the house, which is a feature of the place.

This morning everybody was down late, and it seemed quite a pity, for the weather has changed, and it was fine.

There was a scramble to church by half a dozen of us, I among the number. It is one of Lady Langbourne's eccentricities that, although she never goes to church herself, she insists upon a party being made up every Sunday to go from her house, wherever she may be.

So I went for one, and because I went Sir Arnold managed to scramble down in time to go too.

After luncheon a rush was made for the river, and Sir Arnold and I, and another man and a girl, made up a party for one of the punts.

Unluckily, the two who went with us are in love with each other, so Sir Arnold and I were thrown upon each other for companionship.

It was not that I minded that so much, for I like the little man, but I did not wish to give him an opportunity for becoming affectionate, and this arrangement gave it to him, in spite of me. I took refuge in pretending to be very much bored, so that presently he took the hint and became more sensible. Then I found that he can be really entertaining when he likes, and when he can be persuaded to understand

## 144 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

that every woman doesn't care to be made love to in season and out of season.

He told me all about his shooting expeditions in Africa, and, whether all his adventures happened exactly as he represented or not, he managed to amuse me.

We got quite a long way up the river, and presently, at the suggestion of the other man and the girl, we moored the punt to a tree that grew close to the water's edge, and all got out for a stroll.

I am a good walker, and I wanted to explore the neighborhood, which is very pretty about there. So I struck off by myself, leaving Sir Arnold to fasten the punt and to stow away our cloaks and things out of sight of possible marauders.

He implored me to wait for him, but I didn't mean to do so, and I struck into a lane hidden from the river's bank by a hedge and a clump of trees.

The man and the girl had wandered off in the opposite direction, of course.

I went quite a long way, enjoying the walk immensely, for most of it was across fields where the grass was soft to one's feet.

But Sir Arnold caught me after all, and came panting up, reproaching me for being in such a hurry to get away.

"I always walk so fast," said I, "that nobody can keep up with me. I wanted to reach that hill over there"—and I pointed to a tuft of trees on high ground in front of us—"to take a look round at the landscape."

"That's not the prettiest view," panted out Sir Arnold; "you should have gone to the left, where there is one of the best week-end hotels on the river.

It's quite celebrated in the modern 'Chronique Scandaleuse.'"

"I'm afraid that wouldn't interest me much. We hear enough of that at 'Abbot's Barn' without going out of our way to look for relics of it."

"Well, I agree with you," he said. "But the place is one of the prettiest spots in England. And close by there's a cottage which will interest you for a better reason. It has been painted by half the painter-fellows whose pictures you see on the walls of the Royal Academy."

"I beg your pardon," I said. "I never see them there, because I never go."

He laughed. I must say for Sir Arnold that he makes a very good audience. If you want to make a little joke he is always ready to help you out with mild applause in the right place.

"Well, the cottage is pretty," he went on, "and it is taken every year by somebody one knows. Last year it was Geoffrey Langbourne, and the year before that Lady Usher had it."

"Lady Usher!" I exclaimed, rather struck by the way in which she and her doings seem to haunt me and dog my steps.

"Yes. She has had the place two or three seasons. Very tiny it is, but very picturesque. There. You can see it now, between the trees."

I looked, but we were too far off to see much of it, so we walked on, I forced to put up with the companionship of Sir Arnold, who chattered away and left me free to follow my own reflections about my cousin.

When we got near enough to look up to the cottage, which stood on rising ground with a little garden

and some old trees, I had to agree with him that the place was worth coming to see. In this bright afternoon, with the Virginian creeper growing red on its walls, and the little garden borders bright with dahlias and chrysanthemums, the tiny house made as pretty a picture as could well be imagined.

We were not very near, but our coming disturbed a brindled Aberdeen terrier, who was sitting just outside the gate of the cottage garden. He began to bark vociferously, and presently he ran towards us, just as we were turning away.

I thought he was going to attack us, but instead, he leaped upon me, wagging his tail, and greeting me with every sign of welcome and affection.

I uttered a little cry.

"Why, it's Trot," said I.

And I felt that I grew first red, and then white.

For "Trot" is the name of Harriet's Scotch terrier.

"Why, Lady Usher herself must be there now," said Sir Arnold. "I wonder we hadn't heard. She's your cousin, isn't she?"

"Yes," said I.

I was trying to get rid of Trot, who gamboled and frisked about me, and was evidently disappointed that I was not going back with him to the cottage.

"Go back, Trot," said I. "Go back, there's a good dog."

As I spoke, there came out through the gate of a laborer's cottage, one or two tumbledown dwellings that stood by the roadside, a boy of about twelve years old.

He was armed with a little stick, and he tried to call the dog off.

"He be the dog of the lady and gentleman what

lives oop at the cottage," he explained. "Will I take him back for yer?"

I could scarcely answer, for his words had struck a new vein of thought. "The lady and gentleman at the cottage." The lady was certainly Lady Usher, and the gentleman was as certainly not Sir John. I could see that the same thoughts which were perplexing me had also occurred to Sir Arnold, for he began to talk very fast, and giving the dog into the care of the boy, he turned his face towards the river at the same time as I.

It was a most awkward moment for both of us, and we both grew red as we met each other's eye.

As for me, I was more than disturbed and disgusted, I was frightened. Harriet haunts me wherever I go, and wherever I go, too, the traces of her presence are connected with something which repels and shocks me.

Who is the man with her, the man who is evidently taken for her husband? Knowing her, one knows that it is not her husband. Is it Lord H—— H——?

If not he, who is it? Who is it?

I asked myself the question a hundred times as I walked towards the river bank with Sir Arnold trying to persuade myself that there could be but one answer. Mad, reckless, wicked as she was, she was, of course, she must be, either staying at the cottage with Lord H—— H——, or at least receiving him there as a constant visitor.

But was it Lord H—— H——? Was it? Oh, was it?

By the time we got to the punt Sir Arnold had begun to get quite frightened at the stolid silence with which I met all his attempts at conversation, and at last even he sank under the weight of my

## 148 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

oppressive companionship, and we sat in silence, awaiting the return of the two others.

At last he sprang up in the punt and stepped out, leaving me sitting alone in it.

He walked up and down on the bank, and then, evidently much perturbed, he came back, put his foot on the side of the punt, and said:

"I'm sorry to have to talk about it, but I'm afraid you're very much upset by — by what we found out — heard, I mean, about your cousin at the cottage."

I shook my head.

"There must be some mistake," I said.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I hope so," he said. "But in any case, don't worry yourself about it. Lady Usher does the maddest things, as we all know. But I don't think she could be quite so mad — as — as that."

He thought, dear, good-natured little man, that I was beset with anxiety entirely on my cousin's account. How little he knew what it was that at heart I dreaded!

Every now and then, of course, I experienced a revulsion of feeling, and told myself how wicked I was to harbor a doubt as dreadful as that at my heart. Surely I knew better in whom to put my trust! Surely, surely it was I who was the guilty one, to dare to entertain evil thoughts of one I loved!

And yet I could not help myself, and when the other young people joined us and we started on the return journey to "Abbot's Barn," I sat in my corner among the cushions, and closed my eyes, unable to bear any longer the strain of keeping up a conversation with my thoughts far away.

I knew what Sir Arnold thought from the very fact that he made no mention of Harriet at dinner,

when he mentioned the direction in which we had strolled, and when he was asked who had the cottage this year.

He "did not know," he "had not heard."

Surely, surely I need not worry myself as I am doing.

I wonder whether, when I get back to town tomorrow, I shall dare to ask Gerald where he spent the week-end.

CURZON STREET,

*Monday.*

I WOULDN'T stay at "Abbot's Barn" till to-morrow, as Lady Langbourne wanted me to do, I was too anxious to get back home, and to find out where Gerald had been "on business."

But though I got here early in the afternoon, of course I have not been able to see him yet, as he won't be home till dinner-time.

In the meantime I have had another dreadful shock, one which has made me feel so nearly mad that I have to sit down to write this to keep myself from doing something desperate.

I came up this morning with a batch of week-enders from "Abbot's Barn," and as soon as I got to Paddington, I took a taxi and drove to Letty's place in a little wretched slum where she pays a heavy rent because it is near Sloane Street, to give her the things she had left behind her at "Abbot's Barn" last Monday.

Lady Langbourne had asked me to bring them up, and I was glad to have something to do to pass away the hours until I could speak to Gerald.

Letty was at home, with a bad cold, and she seemed delighted to see me, although she too complained that I was looking wretchedly ill.

No wonder!

I gave her the things she had left behind her, a fan, and a cloak, and answered all her questions about the people who were at Lady Langbourne's.



"Sir Arnold Banbury was there, of course?" she asked mischievously.

"Yes," said I, "and one of the Ockleys."

"Yes, they're fixtures. I wanted to go myself on Saturday, and I would have managed it if I had known you were going to be there. As it was, I spent a most miserable day, never moved out, although I was able to see a few people in the afternoon. Lord Hugh Hawkhurst—you remember him, don't you?—was here, and two or three women."

I uttered a little exclamation in spite of myself.

If Lord Hugh was in town, he was not at the cottage! But perhaps he had come up for the day?

"I remember Lord Hugh," I said as carelessly as I could. "I should not have expected to find him in town at this time of year. Why isn't he shooting partridges?"

"So he is. He was down in Yorkshire, but he comes up to town very often on Sundays, just to see what's going on," said Letty.

I was struck dumb. I let her gossip on, wondering whether she would mention Harriet. But she did not. She was too full of her grievances against Lady Langbourne, whom she accuses of withholding part of the allowance she makes to her for overlooking Geoffrey's imperfections as a husband.

Long before I left the house I was feeling sick to death of the atmosphere of intrigue and sordid mercenary calculation which is the ugly and unpleasant side of all merriment and enjoyment that go on in the merry society Lady Langbourne gets together.

I know—no one knows better than I do—that this sort of thing represents only a very small minority in the life of the rich, and that the majority of the

wealthy people of England live lives as decorous, and as dull, as any other class of the community.

But my experience happens to have thrown me into the very midst of that set which brings itself most prominently forward in the idle life of the day, and each time that I am plunged into it I encounter the same impressions: a sense of delight at its ease and freedom and lightness of heart as I go into it, and a sickening sense of its insufficiency, its shabbiness, and its shallowness, when I struggle out of it again!

When I got home I found papa waiting for me. He had heard from the servants by what train I was expected, and I met him in the hall.

He was looking rather perturbed and unlike himself, I thought.

"So I hear you've been down at Lady Langbourne's again," he said when we had gone into my boudoir together. "Awfully rackety lot, she always has about her. I wouldn't get mixed up too much in it if I were you, Cis."

I noticed quite an unusual seriousness about old papa, which I liked.

"I was very glad to go," I said. "For I was all alone. Gerald had to go away on business at the week-end."

He frowned, rather nervously, I thought.

"Awfully bad habit for a man to get into, to carry his business into the week-end," he said. "I should make him stop it, Cis, if I were you."

"Oh, Papa, you know Gerald. Is he a man to be stopped from doing anything he wants to do?" I asked impatiently.

He pulled his mustache and looked grave.

"Well, you must put your feet down sometimes, my dear," he said. "And I should begin at that. Depend upon it, if you don't, you'll regret it."

I was getting frightened. Indeed, I had reason to be, as I knew. I ran up to papa, and seizing his coat with both hands, so that he couldn't get away, I looked up into his face and asked:

"Papa, what do you *know*?"

But he shuffled and tried to get away.

"'Pon my soul, I know nothing, nothing whatever," he said quickly. "All I can do is to warn you what you ought to do for yourself. As I say, week-end business is generally—h'm—h'm—business of a certain sort, a very improper sort. Saturday to Monday is—h'm—in fact—in certain circles—which, of course, you don't know anything about—a—a sort of proverb, my dear. So all I can do is to advise you to—to, in fact, put your foot down. Put your foot down early, put your foot down strongly. Lawyers—I don't want to be unkind—but lawyers are the very devil—all round. That's how I've found them."

I had released him, and sunk back in a chair, feeling as if I could never hold up my head again. He knew something more than he admitted, I was sure. Or why should he have come round to see me, when he seemed to have nothing to ask of me?

"Papa," I said, pulling him by the hand towards my chair, "sit down and talk to me. Talk to me nicely, not about any of these horrid subjects, but just as you used to do when I was a little girl. Tell me about your dogs and your horses, and what bags you've made up on the moors. Tell me anything," I suddenly burst out with energy, "anything but those

awful things that I don't want to hear about, anything but those things that make me think mamma is right, and that men are all alike, all, all."

He shook his head, and patted my hand, and sat back in his chair, looking so kind and so handsome that I really wonder how he can bore poor mamma so much as she says he does.

He heaved a deep sigh.

"Well, my dear, I'm afraid we are all pretty much alike," he admitted regretfully. "And now what shall I tell you about? As to the bags we made, we've got one or two awful duffers amongst us, but I'll tell you something that happened to me three days ago, a thing, mind you, that I wouldn't have believed if it hadn't happened to myself."

And then he went prosing on, in his dear old way, about some wonderful shots which I couldn't understand in the least. But the sound of his deep, full-toned voice soothed me, and I sat beside him and put my head on his shoulder, just as I used to do, and half listened, just enough to content him, while all the time I was thinking of something else, and wondering whether, if I were really to find Gerald as bad as all the rest, I should leave him, and go away with papa somewhere, far away from everybody, where we could keep horses and dogs and have a garden, and be happy, happy, happy and at peace at last!

At last he had exhausted his stories, even the old ones, and he got up to go. Just when he had said good-by and walked to the door he came back again, and, laying his hand heavily on my shoulder, said, in such an earnest, serious, altogether charming way:

"Look here, Cis. Make the best of him, my girl.

There's always — no matter what your mother says — there's always a best to be made!"

Then he went out, and I wandered about the room and at last sat down and wrote this.

I am getting so very, very nervous about meeting Gerald. Shall I dare to speak to him? To ask him where he was "on business"? I feel sure that I shall never, never be able to do as papa said, and to "put my foot down"!

CURZON STREET,

*Tuesday.*

It is over. I've done it. And I feel as if I had been shaken to pieces! I am dazed, broken, shattered. It will never be the same between us again.

And I have gone through it all for what? What, indeed!

When papa went away yesterday I felt stranded, and so miserable that I had almost made up my mind to go to Brook Street to see mamma, but that I was afraid I might hear more about Harriet.

It was so late when Gerald came home from the office that he had only time to give me a kiss and to scramble into his clothes for dinner. I thought he looked worried and worn, and when I asked him if he had had a long day, he said yes, it had been a very hard-working day, and he should have to work far into the night to make up for the time lost on Saturday.

Then, before I could ask any more questions, he wanted to know what I had been doing at "Abbot's Barn."

I gave him a full account of everything, and mentioned Sir Arnold's having been there.

At the name he frowned.

"Sir Arnold again? And you went out on the river with him?"

"Yes. You know you said I was to meet him like everybody else."

Gerald looked down.

"Quite true. So I did. Well, who was there besides?"

I gave him the whole list of names, as well as I could remember them, and then the programme from end to end of what we did. When I said that we had been to the place where the cottage was—I forget its name, but I described it accurately—I noticed that he looked down at the tablecloth and remained very still.

I felt as if my heart would leap up and choke me.

I said nothing about the incident of the dog. I had thought of mentioning it, but at the last moment I knew that, if I were to speak of it, I should do it in such a way as to betray the interest I took in the cottage and its occupants.

But, although I kept silence about that, he could see that I was unhappy about something, and he spoke very kindly to me, and came to me and kissed me again as we left the room together.

"You'll come and have your coffee with me, Gerald, won't you?" I said, seized with a sudden determination to "have it out" with him, and feeling by instinct that I had got him in the right mood.

He was sorry for me, for some reason or other, of that I was sure. And it made him very kind.

He laughed.

"Well, I suppose I must, since you ask so prettily," he said. "But the fact is I was going straight to the study, for I really am overwhelmed with work."

"But you have no right to be overwhelmed," I said quickly. "Don't you think you owe it to me to give yourself a little more time for rest and relaxation? Look at me, Gerald. Lady Langbourne says I look wretched. Why is it? Surely because I am leading such a melancholy life, all alone all day, while

you are grinding away at the office! And when there's no need, too! It isn't as if you were very poor, and had to do it. If you were, I could forgive you."

We were in the drawing-room by this time, and I was clinging to him, holding him so tightly by the arms that he had to face me, for he couldn't get away.

He looked down at me with his dark face full of gentleness and affection. For a few moments I felt as if the ugly doubts and suspicions I had had of him must be the emptiest, silliest fancies, for he seemed as fond of me, as sweet to me, as ever.

"My dear girl," he said, looking down into my eyes and passing his right hand, still with my hand clinging to his sleeve, softly over my hair, "you don't think I could be content to live idly on your money, do you?"

"No, of course you couldn't. And I don't ask that. But you need not work so very hard as you do."

"Unfortunately there is no medium for us lawyers between working at fullest pressure or getting no work at all to do. If one slacks ever so little, the business has a habit of taking to itself wings and flying to some other fellow who's more industrious. Do you see?"

"I can't see that business has any right to absorb you altogether. It seems to me it's not fair to me."

He pushed me away a little, not unkindly, but with a look which told me that the same thought had occurred to him.

"I'm afraid it is hard upon you," he said. "The question is, how is it to be avoided? You know you used to say, before we were married, that you hated



idleness in a man, and that you would never ask your husband to give up his career for you. You said you would be proud of his working for you. Don't you remember that?"

I had to confess, unwillingly enough, that I had said something of the sort.

"And now you have changed your mind?" he asked, holding my chin in his hand.

"Well, perhaps I have. At any rate, I don't think I ever supposed that your work would take you away from me so much. Even the week-end I have to take away from you now," I added, in a voice which, I could hear myself, had suddenly changed and grown tremulous.

He looked down at me with a different expression upon his face.

"That was only once in a way," he said quickly. "I don't intend to let business take me away from you at the week-end again."

"Sure?"

"Quite sure."

Finding that he was still indulgent, I went on:

"What business was it that took you away on Saturday?"

"Oh, it was something that couldn't be done on any other day. I had to see a person who was only to be seen on Sunday," said he quickly. "That will do, won't it?"

But I was resolved to go on.

"No, it won't," I said. "I felt ridiculous not to be able to answer the questions everybody put to me. 'Where's your husband?' they said. And I couldn't tell them. You might have been in Yorkshire, in Scotland, or in Timbuctoo. I hadn't the least idea what to tell them."

"Why couldn't you tell them it was no business of theirs?" he said rather impatiently.

"Well, at any rate I think I might know myself," I persisted. "Come, Gerald, why won't you tell me?"

"I had to go a little way out of town to see a client. That is really all I can say. The business was of a private nature, and, as you know, it is my rule never to disclose anything at all concerning my interviews with my clients."

"But why should there be so much mystery about this particular one?" urged I.

"There is no more mystery about this business than there is about all my business," said he. "A solicitor's business is all mystery, or ought to be, to every one but his client."

"Oh, yes, yes, I'm not asking you to tell me anything about the business itself," urged I, still holding him tightly, while he tried to get away. "I'm only asking you to tell me where you went to, you know. Surely, surely there need be no secrecy about that."

"Why are you so persistent?" he asked shortly.

And by this time I could see, by the expression on his face, that there was more in his determination not to let me know where he had been than he pretended.

I clung to his sleeve, and I trembled from head to foot. But, drawing a deep breath, I persisted:

"What if I were — if I were jealous, Gerald?"

He was startled, and he tried to throw me off.

"Then you would be a very foolish woman," he said sharply.

It seemed to me that, with all his pretense of annoyance, he looked guilty.

"Will you swear to me," I said, my voice getting more and more hoarse as I grew more excited, more

determined to find out the truth, "that this client you went to see was not — a woman?"

He tried impatiently to get free from my clinging hands.

"What nonsense!" he said, uneasily rather than with surprise. "Of course, I'm not going to swear anything so absurd."

"Well, then, tell me who it was. Was it Sir John Usher?"

"No, it was not," said he sharply. "It was a person you know nothing about. Listen, Cecilia, or I shall think you have lost your senses. Do you suppose me capable of making love to another woman within six months of my marriage to one of the prettiest girls in England? Isn't it outside the bounds of reason and sanity to imagine that I, the most staid and sober and dry of all the members of a staid and sober and dry profession, should go out of my way to involve myself in disgrace and scandal, when I have the happiest home that a man could possibly have, and when I'm married to a woman who knows she is the one love of my life? Come, come, dear, be reasonable, be sane. Don't let the stories you hear from those lively people you meet at 'Abbot's Barn,' people who spend their time in idle flirtation at the best, blind you to life as it is lived by rational people who are not idle. Don't lose your little head, darling, and don't think your sober-sides of a husband is likely to lose his. Come, child, give me a kiss, a kiss of your own accord, and ask me to forgive you for being so silly."

He was so very, very kind; his tone was so gently humorous and tender, his eyes were so full of love and gentleness, that, although I fought hard to be firm

## 162 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

and to insist upon an answer to my question, I felt the ground slipping from under me, and knew that I should have the worst of what I had meant to be a final and victorious encounter.

Little by little he made me laugh at myself, made me ashamed of myself, my doubts, and my questionings, till at last he left me, when we had sat together over our coffee and I had taken a few puffs from his cigarette, feeling that I had not only had the worst of it, and had made myself rather ridiculous, but that I had appreciably lessened my chance of ever finding out what I wanted to know.

He had conquered me, beaten me ; and though I felt soothed and comforted for the time in the knowledge that he loved me, and that my doubts of him were absurd, as he said, I felt, when I was alone, more depressed than satisfied at the result of my battle with him.

It had been a revelation of the power a lawyer possesses of keeping his own counsel. Although he had left me in no doubt whatever as to the depth and reality of his feeling for me, it had left me, too, with the consciousness that his love for me did not make him weak, and that, while he was a miracle of discretion for his clients, he was also a miracle of firmness when dealing with the woman he loved.

I cried a little by and by, and when Gerald came back from the study, tired and sleepy, after finishing his work, he saw that my eyes were red, and he was very kind and gentle and sweet to me.

He tried to interest me in what he had been reading, asked me if I ever read anything but fiction, and said that he thought the book he had bought the day before to read in the train would please me as it had pleased him.

"What book was that?" I demanded rather resentfully. "I thought you never read anything but briefs."

He smiled as he led me towards the door.

"I do sometimes give myself the indulgence of a book," he said. "This one was recommended to me, and when once I began it I couldn't put it down. It is called 'Father and Son.'"

I laughed at him.

"Have you only just discovered that?" I said. "Why, it has been written about as the best book of biography that has appeared for half a century, and everybody in the world but you has read it long ago."

Gerald seemed rather taken aback.

"But I'll read it again with pleasure," I said, laughing at his disconcerted look. "Where is it?"

"It's in my bag."

"All right. You may give it me, and write my name in it. I've only had it from Mudie's."

"All right."

We went upstairs together, and he brought in his bag from his dressing-room, put it on a chair, opened it, and dived in.

"Here it is," said he, as he handed me the volume.

I took it and at once began to turn over the leaves. But I had scarcely done so when I uttered a scream that startled him and made him look up from the bag he was still holding.

"What's the matter?" he asked in alarm.

But I could not answer. My tongue seemed glued to the roof of my mouth. I stood quite still, with the book in my hand, the leaves flapping about as my fingers shook. I could see nothing, hear nothing. For a moment he seemed to disappear, and I could see only the face of the one person I dreaded more than any one else in the world.

"What's the matter?" he repeated, in a voice which sounded more stern, but which seemed to come to my ears muffled, as if from a long way off. "What do you mean?"

But I could not have answered if I would. I don't know how long the silence lasted which followed his words. It seemed an age to me. Then I felt the book snatched out of my hand, and I knew that he was examining it, although I could not see him, could not even see the walls of the room. I seemed to be struck with blindness, with torpor, with insensibility.

For I did not even, after the first moment of horror and shock, feel frightened, or surprised. I was benumbed, dead, cold.

When I came to myself I was sitting in a chair, and the window was open. Gerald was standing over me, and the book was on the floor.

"What is it? Are you ill?" he said.

I had recovered the use of my voice and of my limbs, and I turned, shivering, and pointed to the floor where the book was lying.

When I tried to speak I found that my voice was hoarse and weak.

"That book," I said, and stopped.

"Well, what about it?"

I tried to look up, but I could not meet his eyes.

It was too terrible a thing that I had to say.

"I—I know where you went yesterday," I said, gasping out the words in a husky whisper.

Gerald staggered back.

Gradually I was getting back my strength, and with it my anger, my just anger.

"I know," I went on, "why you would not tell me where you went."

"Cecilia, you are not well. You are raving."

"I am not. I am quite well. Listen. You were with a client, you say. It's not true. You were with the wife of one of your clients."

An exclamation of amazement broke from his lips.

I went on, with a sort of heartbroken laugh.

"Oh, yes, you can't deny it, you can't, you can't. The business that was so important, that couldn't be put off to a working day, was with a — a woman."

"Well, and what if it was? Do you think I have no women clients, and that their secrets haven't got to be kept as well as those of the men?"

I flew up from my chair and faced him.

"Gerald," I gasped out, "don't tell any more lies. It is of no use. I know, oh, I know. You didn't go to see a client at all yesterday. You went up the river"—he started back in spite of himself, but I went on, staring at him steadily—"to see — Harriet Usher, my cousin."

He was by this time prepared for the name, but he tried to laugh it off.

"What on earth makes you take such an idea as that into your silly little head?" he asked.

"It's no silly idea. It's the truth. You have been with her, and she is not your client, but your client's wife. How do I know?" I snatched up the book from the floor and held it to my face. "I know by the perfume that clings to it still, the perfume that clings to everything Harriet touches. You were with her yesterday. Deny it if you can!"

Never in all my life have I seen a man so confounded as Gerald was. For the moment he could not, as I said, even deny it.

But, of course, he was only disconcerted for a few seconds. Then he took the book from me very calmly, and saying: "Perfume! There is no perfume about

it. You ought to be ashamed of yourself to let your silly, jealous fancies carry you so far," he put the book back into his bag, and went to his dressing-room, slamming the door after him.

I sat for a long time where he had left me, and presently, when I heard him moving about again, I tottered into my own dressing-room and rang for Lindsay.

Before she had finished doing my hair I had made up my mind.

I would go into the country, to Fouroaks, if there is no one there, and get Miss Trood to stay with me, while I think over what I am to do.

But in the meantime I would try to behave as if the world had not suddenly come to an end for me, try to bear myself just as if nothing had happened.

Perhaps Gerald will confess presently, I thought, when he sees how gently I bear it.

But he did not. He did not even make any mention of my discovery except to laugh at me, when he came in, and to call me a silly little woman who found mares' nests.

I said nothing, nothing whatever. How could I? I can't nag, like a grocer's wife, and I really have nothing more to say. I have found out, and I know now that the stories Lady Langbourne and mamma tell are all true.

Men are all alike, all alike, and even if you marry the man you love you can't keep him.

Oh, why did I ever have to leave Fouroaks, and old Miss Trood, and dear Kelly and my ponies?

Marriage is a succession of shocks if you marry the wrong man; it is a succession of tragedies if you marry the right!



FOUROAKS,

*September 30th.*

I AM glad to be here again, although I could not get Miss Trood to come with me, as I wished. She is away with an old sister, and there was no time to write, even if she could have come to me. However, there is something in the perfect peace and calm of the dear old place which is like balm to one's soul after all the turmoil and vexation of the last few weeks, and especially after the horrible strain of the last few days.

Gerald thought, I believe, that he had laughed me out of my jealous fears and doubts, for he never alluded to them in the morning, and was very kind.

When I asked if I could go to Fouroaks for a few days, as it was not let to any one, he agreed at once, and said he thought it would do me more good than all the noisy house-parties in the world.

So, as soon as he had started for the City, I began to superintend my packing.

Lindsay, who is devoted to me, and whom I rather like ever since that night at Dieppe when she cried so because she thought I was drowned, was delighted when she heard she was to go with me. I think she was afraid I should have old Kelly back. She is frightfully jealous, because I kiss Kelly when she comes to see me.

I have to tell Lindsay that, when she has left me and gone away to be married to her linen-draper, I shall kiss her too when she comes to pay me a visit.

I hadn't got more than half my things sorted out, for I'm not going to take any smart things down to Four Oaks—it would be profanation to take tight French gowns and cartwheel hats to that darling nest of old memories!—when somebody came up and announced that Lady Rushbury was in the drawing-room.

Mamma!

I could see Lindsay looking at me out of the corners of her eyes; and glancing in the long mirror of my dressing-table, I saw that my face had grown suddenly twice its natural length.

I went downstairs, very soberly, wondering why she had come, and the moment I was inside the drawing-room and had shut the door, mamma advanced towards me dramatically, with her arms spread out, and lots of filmy laces and feather boas and streamers and etceteras flying about her, and flung herself upon me, kissing me and affecting to weep over me.

Mamma can always give the effect of weeping in the most wonderful and touching manner, without ever shedding a tear.

"What's the matter, Mamma?" I cried, knowing all the time that she had found out something I didn't want her to know.

"Oh, I've seen your father, and I know how disgracefully your husband is behaving," she said, holding me off and rattling on, with eyes full of indignation. "Really, considering what a *mésalliance* your marriage was—"

"Hush, Mamma, it was nothing of the kind."

As if it could be of any possible use to try to stop mamma!

She went on, without paying any heed to my remonstrance.

"But really, one may as well marry a prince at once, for it makes no difference to the result when once the novelty is worn off!"

"I haven't the least idea what you mean, and I'm quite sure papa didn't tell you that Gerald has done anything disgraceful, because it isn't true."

Mamma looked at me with penetrating eyes.

"Not true that you've found him making appointments with a woman, and having her shown out of the office quietly so that you might not see her?"

"Oh, hush, Mamma, hush, pray. Did papa tell you that?"

"Yes. And he says you think it was Harriet Usher, but that's quite impossible, as I told him. No doubt it was some woman or other, but it certainly wasn't Harriet. She is too much taken up with somebody else to flirt with any other man at present, especially with her own husband's solicitor!"

I was silent. I wished I could agree with mamma. But she doesn't know as much as I do about the matter, and she hates to see one of the family involved in scandal. Whatever her faults may be, mamma is always loyal to her own blood. She says it is one of the things that distinguish decent people from sweeps, to stand by their relations through thick and thin. Relations by birth, that is; husbands don't count quite so much.

"Where is Harriet?" I asked.

Mamma answered with vivacity:

"She's been at a cottage up the river for the last week."

My face fell. Although I had been sure of this, every little fact that confirms what I know adds to my distress.

"The poor thing is in a very anxious state, of

course. For she hasn't heard from her husband, though she's written him several letters."

"Why doesn't she go to see him?"

"She doesn't dare. Sir John is a man of very peculiar temper — you know these tradesmen are — quite a class apart! There's no accounting for their vagaries — and she doesn't like to risk being refused admission, or anything of that sort."

Knowing Harriet, I could not help thinking that, reckless and fond of her own enjoyment as she is, she is probably too happy in her retirement away from Sir John to be very anxious to get back to Shire Place.

"Where are you going now, Mamma?" I asked, as I was anxious to get away from the subject of Harriet.

"Anywhere you like," she answered at once. "Shall we make a day of it, and go to some of the milliners, and see what they have brought back from Paris? I don't think the new fashions are very pretty ones as far as I have seen them. But, of course, there's always the hope that one may light upon something decent in time, if one looks round with a careful eye."

"I'm afraid I can't come this morning, Mamma. I'm packing up," said I.

She "pricked up her ears," of course.

"Packing up! You're not — already?"

I couldn't help laughing at the insinuation, grew-some as it was.

"No, Mamma, I'm only going down to Fouroaks for a week. Gerald thinks the air of the old place will do me more good than country-house parties."

"Oh, my dear child, that moldy old barrack! You'll be bored to death! I do wish I could come with you. But I've got such a heap to do, commit-

tees and bridge and things, for the next fortnight, that I don't think I could manage it."

As one of the clauses of the agreement between papa and mamma is that she shall not come to Four-oaks, I knew the value of this suggestion. Still, I thanked her, and reminded her that I was never lonely at Four-oaks.

She shook her head.

"Ah, but you've been married since then. That does make such a difference! One can put up with so much before, and with so little after," she said sagely. "However, of course you needn't stay there any longer than you choose. And if you like, I'll run over to Paris with you when you get tired of loneliness, as you will do in about three days."

"Thanks, Mamma. I won't forget."

"And as soon as you're gone," said mamma, with glowing indignation, "I shall tackle Mr. Calstock, and bring him to book over his treatment of you."

"Oh, no, no."

"Oh, but I shall. Of course, it was your father's place to have done it, but as he chooses to neglect his duty, it devolves upon me."

"But, Mamma, there's nothing to do," I pleaded. "How could papa speak to Gerald, when there's nothing to speak about? Surely he must know that a lawyer is bound to have clients who are not proper persons for his wife to meet! And, in any case, I was in the wrong for going to the office. There is nothing in the world wrong in our relations, and I do beg you to believe it."

"Your father thinks there *is* something wrong. He came to see me, to reproach me with it. Said your unhappy marriages were all my fault, and that, if I hadn't hurried you into becoming the wife of Sir

Lionel, you wouldn't have had to throw yourself away on —"

I stopped her by such a look, and such a shaking — for I seized her arm and hung on with all my might — that she grew very red and said I hurt her. But I didn't let her go. I clung tightly to her hand and arm, and made her meet my eyes with hers as I said:

"Mamma, I won't allow such words even from you. You don't understand, you don't understand, the truth. You did a wicked thing in marrying me to Sir Lionel, but I went through it all, because I was a child, and didn't know what marriage was. Now I've made my own choice, with my eyes open, knowing everything. I've made a good choice, the only one possible to me. You've got to respect it. You've got to refrain from saying such things as you were going to say. If you don't, Mamma, I'm very sorry to have to say it, but I can't see you again. I've married the man I love, and even if we have differences and disagreements, and if I have to put up with some things, I am satisfied, and I won't allow any one to interfere. There. That's all."

Mamma is much too clever not to know when she is dealing with a person who is in earnest, and before I had got to the end of my speech, which looks better now that I have written it down than it sounded as I jerked out the words, stammering and panting, into her ear — she had recovered her good humor.

"Very well, my dear," she said, as she got away from me, and at once took out her little powder-puff and hand-mirror from her bag, to repair the havoc my savagery had made, "very well. You know your own affairs best, I suppose, and I shall say nothing more. If you don't want us to take your part, I suppose we must submit. As for your husband, I'm sure I have

no wish to say anything against him. I dare say he is no worse than other men, and, if you are satisfied, what more need I say? Fortunately, you're independent of anybody—owing to my wickedness in marrying you early to a rich man. It's only just to me to remember that."

She said the last words with a delightful smile, as it were burning them into my ungrateful soul.

Then she kissed me effusively, taking care to give me a long, earnest look and to finish up with a deep sigh, and then, as if afraid that her feelings might be too much for her, breaking away quickly, and waving her hand, as if quivering with agitation, as she went out.

Mamma is always airily dramatic, and never forgets to be picturesque!

But she didn't offer to see me off on my journey, and so I came down here yesterday with just Lindsay, and it is, oh, so peaceful and lovely in the old place!

I sleep in my own old room, to the disgust of Mrs. Hillier, who had got the best bedroom ready for me.

But I could not have been comfortable in that great bare, cold-looking room, especially as it isn't as it used to be, all heavy four-poster and old flowered hangings and ancient mahogany, for it has had to be done up to suit the taste of some stockbroker who had Fouroaks for two years. He was to have had it again this summer, but luckily he died, so it has been unlet, and I am able to come here and enjoy it.

But I don't like the changes! Mrs. Hillier and I went round the place as soon as I got here, and I think it must have been rather funny to see us weeping over the new carpets that have been put down instead of the old ones that would scarcely hang together, and to hear us moaning over the "modern improve-

ments" which Mrs. Clewes insisted upon before she could condescend to stay in the house.

I asked Mrs. Hillier what the people were like, and she raised her eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders, and said:

"Oh, they were very good sort of people—of their class, my lady. Mr. Clewes thought a good deal about eating, and Mrs. Clewes thought a good deal of her own importance; and that was all the character they had, my lady. Their sons and daughters were better, being young. But they didn't care for the place, only for being able to say they had 'taken Lord Rushbury's house,' as you could plainly see; and I'm very thankful they won't come here again."

I was turning over a plan in my mind, so I said very little.

What if I could take over Fouroaks from papa, and keep it from further desecration?

I turned to her abruptly.

"You haven't parted with the old things, the carpets and old bedsteads, have you?" I said.

She looked horror-struck at the idea.

"Oh, no, my lady. They're all stowed away safe; but—I'm sorry to say that the study carpet will hardly hold together to be put down again."

This was a tragedy indeed. I remembered that carpet so well, and the hole Penrhyn and Marjorie and I burnt in it that Christmas Eve when we dropped a lantern on to it!

However, as I told her, there was a lot of dear old furniture left, after all; if we were to let a couple of carpenters and half a dozen upholsteresses loose about the place for a fortnight, we should be able to effect just enough "restoration" to please us.



How I did love the old lady for being so pleased when I suggested that I might come back again, for part of the year at least, to the old place! And how I threw my arms round her when she told me that Fan and Flurry and Folly were still alive!

I ran out to see them, and to take them some sugar, and on my way to the stables it gave me a most strange, eerie feeling to pass by the old aviary, and to see that two of the four doves Sir Lionel gave me were still alive!

It was shuddery! To think of all that I have gone through since he sent me those pretty little birds, and of his being dead too! It made me shiver, and feel quite sentimental! For he was kind to me at first, and those doves did give me pleasure when they came!

It was awfully hard not to cry when I got to the stables, for two or three of the grooms and stablemen were the same as in the old days, and they were so glad to see me, and in such a hurry to take me to the ponies, that I was quite excited, and felt as if I were little Cis Rushbury again.

And then when, after dinner, I went into the village and knocked at the door of Nannie Barnes' cottage, she screamed out so loudly with joy at seeing me that I nearly cried again.

And this morning I am told that the old Hawkinse and Mrs. Fielder are mad with jealousy, because I went to see Nannie first!

Oh, it is lovely to be here again!

Only I can't forget Gerald, and I am wondering all the time if it is possible that there is nothing in the horrid doubts and fears I have had about him!

Among all these sights and sounds that I love, there comes suddenly from time to time such a sadness upon me, when I remember what has happened since I was

## 176 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

last here, and that, though one can forget it all for a little while, the burden of life has to be taken up again, and things can never be quite the same as they used to be!

FOUROAKS,

*October 3rd.*

LIFE trickled on most peacefully till yesterday, when the old worries came back with new ones to bear them company, and I wished with all my heart I had never come down here.

For I got two letters which made me uneasy. One was from Gerald, very affectionate, hoping I was well and enjoying myself, and saying that he was going away on business, and that he should not be back in town for a few days.

The second letter was from mamma, saying that she had seen Harriet, who is also going out of town for a few days.

I am ashamed of the uneasiness I feel at what is, I really believe, nothing but a coincidence; but still I do wish I had not got these two letters at the same time.

I am ashamed of doubting my own husband as I do, when I love him so much and when I have always found him the most trustworthy man I have ever met.

But it does not matter how many arguments I bring forward to myself to quiet my own heart, I can't help feeling that there is danger for me somewhere, and if that danger is the threatened loss of his heart, I shall never be happy any more.

Again and again I have said to myself that I have no proper ground for suspicion, and it is true: I have not. All the little incidents and coincidences

I know of are as nothing against the fact that my husband married me for love—not for money and social ambition as my people pretend—and that I am sure he loves me still. And yet—and yet—I can trust my own instinct—and I know that he is keeping a secret from me, and I believe that that secret concerns Harriet. God knows I am not jealous by nature, but loving Gerald as I do, and hearing, as I do, on all sides that same horrible, ugly, monotonous story of men being inconstant and untrustworthy, I can't help wondering when I ought to be trusting, and torturing myself when I should like just to shut my eyes and believe that all is well.

FOUROAKS,

*October 5th.*

SOMETHING happened yesterday which has frightened me very much.

I had spent the afternoon with the Hawkinses and Mrs. Fielder in the village, and had tea by myself in the breakfast-room, and then I went down to the paddock to see the ponies.

It was raining dismally, as it had done off and on all day, and although it was only five o'clock, it was quite dark under the trees, which dripped on my head as I ran, bareheaded, down the walk to the paddock.

I had thrust my arms into a mackintosh, and suddenly, as I went down the walk and brushed my way through the plantation, there came into my head, in the strangest manner, the remembrance of that day, not much more than a year and a half ago, when I ran down in the rain to see the ponies in the stable, and met Sir Lionel for the first time.

As I thought of it, I looked round me, almost thinking I heard the footsteps again near me, as I had done that day.

When I walked on again, I stopped and looked round quickly, for I felt sure that I had heard some one, and then that I saw a man among the trees.

It was uncanny, and I felt as if my blood was freezing in my veins, for there was really a dark figure a few yards away; and in the gloom of the late afternoon, with the heavy rainclouds above and the trees below, I almost fancied for the first few

moments that it was not a man, but a spirit, that stood, gray and ghostlike, among the wet trees and the long wet grasses and bushes.

Of course, it was only for a moment. Then I asked in a hoarse but very peremptory voice:

"What's that?"

What was my astonishment when the gray figure came slowly brushing its way through the trees, and became distinct, human, and — recognizable.

A little slender, mackintoshed figure stepped out and raised its hat, and said shyly:

"How do you do, Lady Cecilia?"

It was Sir Arnold Banbury!

For the first moment I was so much amazed that I forgot to be angry at this sudden and odd intrusion.

"Sir Arnold!" I exclaimed. "Where did you come from?"

He was profusely apologetic and explanatory.

"I was staying with some friends a little way from here," he said, "and passing in my car I thought I caught sight of you among the trees. So I got out and — and —"

"How did you get in?" I asked abruptly, suddenly conscious of the absurd unconventionality of this visit, and of the imprudence of it.

"I — I got over the paling," said he.

"What paling?"

He pointed vaguely behind him, and I, much vexed and surprised at his having taken such a liberty, knew that he must have been deliberately waiting about for me, as the walk by which I had come from the house is at no point visible from the highroad.

I stood erect and very dignified.

"And now," I said, "of course you want to know the nearest way out. If you go straight on" — I

turned and pointed along the path by which I had come from the house, "you will find a gate on your right which opens into the rose-garden, and a path will take you through into the park. After that you will have no difficulty, for you can follow the drive."

He muttered something abjectly apologetic, and half turned, as if he meant to follow my directions. But then he suddenly changed his mind, and came towards me, humbly, and in a state of great agitation.

"I beg your pardon," he said quickly. "I see you look upon this as an intrusion."

"Of course I do," I said quickly. "It is an intrusion, you know. There is no other word for such a strange visit, as you must see for yourself. What on earth induced you to come?"

He hesitated for a moment, and then said quickly:

"I—I wanted to see you. I had heard something—heard that you were unhappy, and—and—I do hope you'll forgive me, but I wanted to know whether it was true that you had come away from town all by yourself, and—and whether there was anything I could do."

I was at first as much bewildered as annoyed, but after the first few moments I was seized with a great fear. This visit of his was something more than a most marvelous coincidence, I felt sure.

"Who was it told you all that nonsense?" I asked quickly.

He hesitated.

A light flashed suddenly through my mind.

"Was it Lady Usher?" I asked sharply.

"N—n—not exactly," stammered he.

"What do you mean by 'not exactly'?"

"I mean," said Sir Arnold, "that it was not direct from her that I heard it."

"From whom, then?"

He flushed and hesitated most piteously, but I persisted. At last, however, he grew desperate, and plucking up his courage, said with more firmness than I should have thought the little fellow capable of:

"Lady Cecilia, I hope you won't mind if I say that I can't tell you who told me this. I am very glad, however, to find it's not true, that you are not unhappy, and that I've been misinformed. Pray believe me I am very sorry I intruded. I—I—I have made a d——d—I mean I've made a fool of myself—"

I interrupted him. By that time I had recovered myself a little; I was amused, as well as rather touched, in a silly kind of way, by his showing so much stupid and injudicious interest in me and my sorrows; so that I laughed before he could get to the end of his halting speech.

"Well, I'm afraid you have done that," I said. "And you'd better not trust the person who told you that stuff about me. For whoever the person is, the person appears to have very inaccurate sources of information."

I was rather proud of all these long words, which had an excellent effect upon the silly little man. He seemed quite crushed, and he stood for a few moments, looking very foolish, and then moved a little, and said nervously:

"Well, I see that—that I've been made a fool of. I can only apologize, and take myself off as quickly as possible, as I shouldn't like you to be the subject of any idle gossip through me."

I had got over my first indignation, and over my subsequent amusement too. But these badly chosen words irritated me more than ever. I held out my



hand to detain him, and quickening my pace, came up with him, as he started to walk under the trees.

"You need have no fear of any gossip where I am concerned," I said very severely. "I am much too well known here, in my own country, and among my own people, for any such thing to hurt me."

He looked at me—he always has to look *up* to me, by the bye—with a deprecatory expression in his eyes.

"Don't be angry with me, pray don't," he said. "Really it's not fair. If you knew how very, very anxious I am to do only whatever pleases you best, you wouldn't be so much offended."

"Well," said I, somewhat mollified by his abject manner, and determined to show him how absurd he was making himself, "it will please me better, Sir Arnold, if, when next you wish to call upon me, you come to the door, in the usual manner, and ask the servants whether I am at home."

He seemed much confused at this, and said:

"I didn't like to come. I was afraid you might think it an intrusion."

"Not at all. I'm delighted to see my friends at any time. So that you may have no doubt about it, I am going to take you through the house, so that you will know the way to the front door another time."

He was deeply humiliated, but I was pitiless. He tried to excuse himself from coming into the house; but I took no notice of what he said, and stalked beside him, pointed out, as we went through, some of the family portraits that hung in the hall, remarking on their peculiarities in a high, throaty voice that could not, I knew, fail to show him that he had done himself irreparable injury in my eyes.

As it was by this time almost dark, and there was no light as yet in the hall, I don't think he was much the wiser for the information, though I hope he has profited by my lesson in other ways.

Then I called one of the servants, whom I heard moving about on the staircase, and informing him that Sir Arnold Banbury had lost his way, I told him to accompany him to the lodge-gates. Then I said good-by with a bow and a studiously artificial smile—one of those fixed and horrid convulsions of the features which would freeze a waterfall, bowed to him without shaking hands, and retreated, looking, I do hope, less frightened and wretched than I felt.

For I don't like this visit at all, and I am sure that it was suggested to him by somebody who has a grudge against me. My fears point to Harriet, but all the while I say to myself that this may be only my prejudice. Yet who else would advise such a step to the silly little fellow? He has no harm in him, I am sure, and yet great harm might be done to me just at this moment, when the relations between Gerald and me are so strained, by any report which might get to his ears about such visits as this!

I wrote to Gerald at once, telling him all about Sir Arnold's coming, and representing it all in the most ludicrous light I could; but unfortunately I don't know how soon he will get my letter, as he said in his last he was going away "on business." Supposing some account, garbled and distorted, of Sir Arnold's silly coming should reach his ears before he gets my letter, it is probable that he would be annoyed instead of amused. He has never got over his displeasure at the yachting adventure, and though he is not jealous, I suppose he might become so.

Since the strange new developments of the past few

weeks, I don't feel so sure of him in any way as I used to do!

The incident has made me rather miserable, and when I was told this morning by old Mrs. Hawkins, of a big, yellow motor-car which has been seen about here during the last few days, with two gentlemen in it, whom I know from the description to be Sir Arnold and Lord Hugh Hawkhurst, I felt even more uneasy than before.

What do they want about here? The yellow motor-car is Sir Arnold's, I know, and Lord Hugh is his dearest friend.

I hate them both!

FOUROAKS,

*October 6th.*

I KNEW the presence of the yellow motor-car and its occupants meant mischief!

This morning I was out riding, and only got in just before luncheon, when I was told that there was a lady waiting to see me in the Blue Saloon.

She had given no name, and the servant who told me about her professed not to know her, saying only that she was tall and wore a thick veil.

I had a presentiment of misfortune as I went upstairs and changed my habit; and when I came down again and entered the room where the mysterious visitor was waiting, I was prepared for almost any shock but the one I received when she put up her veil and I recognized — Harriet.

The meeting was a most awkward one. I could not make any attempt to appear glad to see her, and though she seemed prepared for my coldness and overdid her own warmth, kissing me and embracing me very ardently, I remained and showed that I remained quite cold.

Kissing me must have been like kissing one of the big blocks of ice one sees in a fishmonger's shop!

And yet, even as I sat like an automaton, stiff and stolid, listening to the outpourings of her alleged affection for me, I could not help asking myself why I was not glad to see her, since at least I was now sure that, as she was with me, she was not with some one else!

I was wondering why she had come, and instinctively fearing that, whatever her object might be, it was one that boded no good to me.

It is most strange how my dread of her has grown since our last meeting, which was at Folkestone. I suppose it is my jealousy which has affected all my feelings; but even that, I think, scarcely accounts for the sick disgust and secret fear with which she inspires me.

I ought, I am sure, to have had for her long since, when I first found her out in her shocking behavior at Cowes, the same feelings that I have now. But I remember that, shocked as I was then, and amazed and disgusted at her conduct, I was ready to make excuses for her, and to agree to keep silent about what she had done. But it was that I believed, then, that she was maddened and blinded by a love she could not master, so that I could feel a little sorry for her too, with all my disgust.

But now that I have reason to fear that she is not the victim of a devouring passion for one man, but a wicked and dangerous flirt, ready to bestow herself wherever she can do so with advantage to herself, I cannot even pretend to look upon her with the old lenient eyes.

Harriet is much too clever to waste her time, and she soon saw that all her affectionate words were leaving me cold.

"What is the matter with you, Cis?" she asked at last, impatiently. "Are you offended at my coming to see you? Are you going to turn against me, as well as my husband?"

"Of course not," I said, in the same prim cold tone I had used ever since she came. "I don't turn against people."

"That's what I should have thought, but I don't know how otherwise to account for the way you are treating me," she said. "You appear to have grown very 'good,' my dear, since I saw you last."

"Have I?" I said mechanically.

"Yes. Of course, I quite understand the attitude you are taking, of being shocked at receiving a visit from your poor cousin, whom her husband won't receive at his home."

"Nonsense, Harriet," I said.

"If you're not shocked, why are you so nasty to me?"

I hesitated. What should I do? Should I make a clean breast of it, acknowledge the suspicions and fears I had had, and hear what she had to say? My impulse was strong to do this, but I was afraid. One can't help admiring Harriet, one can't be long with her without feeling the softening powers of those gentle tones and movements of hers, of those pleading looks she knows how to give, and all the rest of her well-filled armory of charms. But when one has such very strong suspicions as I have about the use to which she puts those charms, it is not in human nature not to try to steel oneself against them.

And I decided that to hint at my vague fears would be unwise. She would be indignant, of course. But how could I feel sure that her indignation was not put on as well as the rest?

"I don't think it's fair to say I'm nasty," I said. "I was taken by surprise. Why have you come? And why didn't you give your name to the footman?"

This latter circumstance was quite enough, by itself, to have kept my suspicions alive. For surely there was no reason, unless she felt that I had some right

to object to her visit, for not giving the man her name!

She hesitated, and then burst into tears.

"I'm so driven about," she said, sobbing, "that I thought perhaps you would treat me like the rest!"

It was horrid to hear a woman, and my own kinswoman, talk like that. I was softened against my will.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Who's driving you about?"

"Oh, you know, you must know," she said reproachfully. "Considering that Sir John's solicitor is your husband, how can you help knowing all about it?"

I denied energetically.

"I never interfere in Gerald's business affairs," I said. "And he wouldn't satisfy my curiosity if I did."

"Well, then, I suppose I must tell you. I have written to Sir John, begging him to let me go back to Shire Place, but he won't answer. I even went down there, at the risk of being turned out of the house. But I was told Sir John was away, and I had to come back to town without even seeing my children."

And she broke down and burst into tears.

I have never felt more uncomfortable in all my life than I did then. I didn't know what to do. It was dreadful, if it was true, that she should be treated like that, without having any definite charge brought against her. And, even if she has not seemed to care much for her children, it must have been frightfully hard to feel that she dared not ask to see them.

Between my longing to be nice, and to try to comfort her, and the suspicions I could not quite stifle

that she felt less than she pretended to do, I was puzzled and confused and uncertain. She knew how to take advantage when she saw me hesitating. I was sitting by the window; I had turned to look out at the trees and flowers, and I can see them now, blown about by the wind, the dahlias all bent and broken, and the leaves flying about, dashing in little gusts against the panes.

I wouldn't look at her, but always at the garden, even when I heard her whisper, ever so plaintively, "Cis, Cis, aren't you sorry for me?"

I felt that I was hard, and I felt ashamed of myself; but yet I held out as long as I could, knowing I could not trust her. But, when we had sat without uttering a word for a few moments, I still staring at the flying leaves as they crackled against the window and fell into little heaps on the terrace, I felt her hand steal round my waist, and her head rest on my shoulder.

She had got me, and she knew it. I made a silly little fluttering attempt to get up and escape, but she held me fast.

"Cis," she said, "you are a happily married woman, and you ought to have compassion upon a woman who is not so happy. Don't put on airs of superior virtue because you know something that nobody else knows about me. It won't do. You would have done the same, remember, if Sir Lionel hadn't died."

I was shocked, and I shook my head vehemently. But she only laughed.

"Oh, yes, you would," she said. "You couldn't have loved Sir Lionel, any more than I could love Sir John, and you would certainly have loved some one else before long, even if you didn't love Gerald Calstock while your first husband was alive."



"I might have loved him," I retorted. "But I certainly shouldn't —"

I stopped, ashamed of going on. But Harriet, who was calmer now she knew that she had me fast, laughed, and passed her handkerchief across her eyes quite good-humoredly.

"I dare say not," she said sarcastically. "I dare say you would have been more artful than I can be. You would have known how to take care of yourself. Now where I love, I love altogether. I can't make any wise reservations. Of course, it's a dreadful thing to own to, and I wouldn't say it to anybody but you, but it's the truth."

I didn't attempt to argue the point. In the first place, it seemed to me very absurd to suppose that I, who am only two-thirds her age, and do not pretend to be clever, could take more care of myself than Harriet, who is very handsome, very clever, and who has had ten or twelve years' experience of married life — with vicissitudes. And in the second place, it seems rather absurd to be discussing such nice points as to the better or the worse way of deceiving one's husband.

So I sat as stiffly as I could, and when she had fired her sarcastic speech into me, I just waited.

She did not like that. She wanted argument to keep her warm, and when I wouldn't argue, she felt flat and uneasy.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, giving me a little shake.

"Only that I don't want to talk about it all," I said. "Where's the use of it?"

She got up from her knees, very gracefully, but with her head held very high. And she walked to the window and drummed upon it with her pretty,

slender fingers, while I again watched the swaying of the long branches against the panes.

Then she turned suddenly.

"I suppose," she said, "it would be of no use, seeing that you are in such a highly virtuous mood, for me to ask you to let me stay here with you a few days?"

There was a note of anxiety in her tone, under the superficial pretense that she spoke idly, and didn't care what my answer was, which touched me and made me uneasy.

I did not want Harriet to stay with me. I cannot care for her after all that has passed, and though at one moment she conquers all my hard thoughts and makes me ever so sorry for her, the next I remember not only what happened at Cowes, but those unexplained interviews with Gerald.

I did not know what excuse to give, for I could not refuse without a reason. She took advantage of my silence to press me more earnestly.

"Oh, Cis, do let me stay," she urged, bending towards me and laying her hands upon my shoulders as I sat, dumb and stupid, without trying to answer. "Do, do, do. Just a few days! You don't know what good it would do me, to be for just a little while in the right atmosphere, in the dear old place. Come, you know how healing it is, with its peaceful well-ordered life, *our* life, dear, and how sweet it is to be surrounded by all the old family sights, and to feel the old family feelings! You wanted to come, didn't you? And you have found the benefit of it already, I'm sure. For you look as sweet and happy as you did in the old days, almost. Come, let me stay, do, dear, do."

It was a dreadful struggle, but it could only end in one way.

What she said was true. The old atmosphere, the dignity, the peace, the feeling that everything went on wheels round one, with no jar, no discord, was working wonders already upon me, and I could understand and sympathize with the longing she had, after the buffetings and storms and struggles she had been through lately, to rest a little while where no ill wind could reach her, and where she was safe from gossip and from unkind comments.

"I'm not here for more than a few days," I said, almost pleading with her to leave me to my solitude.

"Well, and I don't even want to stay as long as you do," she went on eagerly. "All I ask is just a couple of days' rest and peace," and she shut her eyes and gave a long sigh which did, indeed, seem genuine. "Oh, Cis, can't you understand what I feel? After the humiliations, the insults I have had to put up with lately—after writing and writing without getting any answer, and yet without being told anything definite that I could meet and reply to—after being refused admittance—to my own home—"

"Refused admittance?" I echoed.

"It was practically that, wasn't it? To be told that Sir John was away, and not even to be admitted as a matter of course. Oh, Cis, you don't know how dreadful it was to be treated like that! By one of my own footmen too!"

She suddenly let me go, and covered her face with her hands, and I could see the red color rushing up to her face and neck.

I felt my heart go out to her in spite of myself. For one thing I began to feel that this visit to me

disposed — or appeared to dispose of some of my own fears. And it struck me as unfair that she should be kept away from her home, without any definite charge being brought against her. It was as if her husband hoped, by keeping her in this terrible suspense, to find out something against her, something strong enough to justify his treatment.

She sobbed, not ostentatiously, but convulsively, and I felt all my courage and power of resistance ebbing away.

I believe she knew that I was melting, for she looked up, and began another sort of attack.

"And oh, Cis, don't you think you owe me some reparation for what your husband is doing?"

"My husband!" I echoed, stupidly.

"Yes, yes. Oh, you know he is Sir John's solicitor, and that he is helping him and advising him in all this. It is he, Mr. Calstock, who is no doubt in part answerable for my being kept off in this manner, for my being separated from my children! Oh, Cis, what it is to be left to wonder whether I shall ever be allowed to see them again! Ask yourself, dear, if it's fair, to condemn me unheard like this. Ask yourself whether you would not feel as I do, as if you were an outcast, an exile, if you were forbidden to go back to your husband's house, if you were to write letters to him without getting an answer, and all without ever having had a happy married life, to which you could look back, and which you could recall as a lever to get your husband to treat you well."

"If you were never happy together, why don't you allow him to arrange a separation?" I suggested, thankful to have escaped for the moment the subject of her proposed stay.

She shook her head quite vehemently for her.

"It would be social ruin and death, especially after all the talk there must have been," she said with decision. "And how should I live? He wouldn't let me have the children, and I should have to take just what small allowance he chose to give me, and after the life I've been used to, how could I manage? And what could you expect of me, a woman with warm blood in her veins, not a painted window saint by any means, if I were left stranded like that?"

The hint was a broad one, and I understood it. But I was shocked.

"Surely," said I, "you would never see again the man who got you into such trouble and dis—"

I stopped short, but she took up the word quite calmly:

"Disgrace? Well, I'm not like you. I can bear anything where I love."

I don't know why she should have thought I couldn't, but I did not say so.

"I hope you don't see anything of that person now," I said.

She answered very quickly:

"Of course not. How could I be so mad — now too? No, I have to live the life of a hermit, and it's because of that I ask you to take pity on me. Come, Cis, just for two days, keep me here with you, my dear, keep me here with you!"

There was no mistaking her earnestness now, no possibility of thinking she was acting. It seemed as if her whole soul were in her beautiful, long eyes as she clung to me, implored me to let her stay.

I had to agree, even though I felt, as I spoke, that I was behaving foolishly, and that Gerald would be

angry when he heard of it. It was weakness, pure weakness, not good-nature or anything nobler, that made me unable to resist her entreaties.

"Very well," I said nervously. "Though I'm sure you will be bored to death, and though I know you will be sorry you asked me, I will let you stay here for a couple of days if you want to. But don't ask me to do anything more, for I can't, I really can't."

She kissed my hands, though I tried hard to prevent her. There was something so wildly passionate and extravagant in her manner and in her incoherent thanks that I recognized at once, though vaguely, that I had done wrong in letting her stay.

"I won't ask anything, anything more of you, my dear child, and I bless you for your kindness. I knew my little Cis had too good a heart to turn her back on a relation in real sorrow. Kiss me, dear, kiss me, and you can tell yourself, when you've finished the day, that you've saved a fellow-creature from—something you wouldn't have liked to hear about."

"What do you mean?" I asked, my voice cracking in all sorts of odd ways as I spoke the words.

She was on her feet again, drying her eyes and smiling in a curious, uncanny way.

"Only this, that I couldn't have gone on with the wretched life I've been leading: I should have gone away from here, and—taken an overdose of something. That's the ladylike way of making an end of things, when they get unendurable, isn't it?"

"How can you, Harriet? Things are not nearly so bad as you make out," I said. "You have friends, you have mamma, and you have me."

She turned towards me effusively, and seized my arms again.

"You, yes. And I thank God for it. As for

Aunt Vi, we all know what she is: she seems all right, but one can't trust her. At any moment — for a consideration — she may go over to the enemy."

I had to affect to be angry, though really I only felt rather alarmed as to what might be going to happen in Harriet's rather varied career.

"You have no right to talk like that of mamma," I said.

She was apologetic directly.

"All right. I'm sorry if I've said anything to hurt your feelings, dear. But really I thought we all knew Aunt Vi too well to mind hearing criticisms upon her. Now let's forget her, and our husbands, and everybody, and be happy for a little while."

She walked across the room, singing to herself in that pretty, deep, penetrating contralto voice of hers, with a look and manner as if she had not a care in the world.

While surprised at the rapid change in her, I caught at the expression she had used. Why should she couple my husband with hers? What did she know about the slightly strained relations between me and Gerald?

But before uttering the questions that rose to my lips I paused, and decided to leave them unasked.

It was singular that this grudging invitation which I had given her, or rather which she had wrung out of me, made me as depressed as it made her elated.

At once I began to wonder why she should hail it with so much delight; and the suspicions of Gerald, which for a little while her coming had dispelled, came back again, more vaguely, indeed; but none the less strongly.

Then there flashed into my mind another cause for alarm.

## 198 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

I knew that Sir Arnold and Lord Hawkhurst had been seen in the neighborhood within the last few days, and I wondered whether Harriet knew it.

Was it she who had advised Sir Arnold to take the extraordinarily indiscreet step of paying me a sort of would-be secret visit? If so, then indeed I had made a great mess of it in asking her to stay with me.

As for asking her any more questions, I decided against it. I would keep on the surface of things as much as possible, and get rid of her as soon as I could.

In the meantime, as Harriet has far too much tact and cleverness not to know how to make herself agreeable, she contrived to make the time pass very pleasantly indeed. She sang to me, taking some of the musty old books with the faded marbled backs that are piled up in corners of the two saloons, and making one see the old charm in them, so that they please in spite of the change of fashion.

And then she sang me some songs out of the musical comedies that are being played in London, and she was as charming in those as she was in the old-fashioned sentimental ones. It makes me feel horribly nervous to sit and watch her and listen to her when she is at the piano, for one can understand the fascination she has for men when one sees how clever she is, and how charming she can be.

I wonder why she never got on with Sir John! I suppose he is a perfect bear!

Gerald says he is a good sort of man, but his treatment of her now is cruel, there can be no doubt of that, and I wish that it were not my own husband who is advising him and working for him.

I shall get into trouble with Gerald for having her here, I am quite sure.



The day has passed pleasantly enough on the surface, although I have been rather disturbed with thoughts and fancies which I could not talk about to Harriet.

She began to yawn so soon after dinner that I suggested an early retreat to our rooms, and she thanked me eagerly, and said she was, indeed, quite worn out.

But I must say she didn't look in the least tired when we said good night. On the contrary, she seemed as fresh, and as bright-eyed and light of movement, as when she first arrived.

However, I dare say she is as glad as I am to be alone!

FOUROAKS,

*October 7th.*

I MIGHT have known, I ought to have known, that I could not trust Harriet!

Now she has surpassed herself, and I will never speak to her again.

I scarcely dare trust myself to write down what I think about her, and I am in the greatest distress as to what will happen next.

I didn't feel quite easy in my mind about her last night, knowing how angry Gerald and even papa will be when they know that I let her stay here with me.

I don't see, even now, that I could help myself without an appearance of cruelty to a woman who is, after all, of my own blood, and who is in unhappy circumstances besides.

But when we had said good night to each other, and I had taken her myself to her room, and calmed her fears about ghosts, and rats, and burglars — for I found she was in a highly nervous condition — I went to my own, and instead of going to bed when Lindsay had done my hair, I sat down in my little tub arm-chair, thinking.

I have never slept in the same house with Harriet since that dreadful time at Cowes, and this circumstance sent my thoughts back to that night, and to the dreadful discovery I then made.

At one moment I felt so much disgust with her that I was sorry I had let her stay, and then the next I was thankful that she had come, and that I now felt easier in my mind about Gerald, since even she would

not have had the hardihood to visit me if the worst of my fears had been justified.

I was so much agitated by the event of the day and the thoughts it had given me, that I knew it was impossible for me to sleep, so I took a book from the little shelf in the corner, and drawing a little table in front of my chair, and lighting two more candles, I decided to read till I felt inclined for rest.

In spite of myself, my memory of that night at Cowes was so strongly upon me that instinctively I listened from time to time, as if I were back at Lady Langbourne's, and at last, of course, I worked myself into such a state, that I imagined noises every five minutes.

As my old bedroom, which I still use, is at the back of the house, overlooking the lawns, and close to the first trees which border the long walk to the stables, there is always a noise going on when the night is windy, a sighing and souging of the branches, which tap against my window-panes.

Usually I don't mind it, but when you are sitting up, rather uneasy in your mind, it gets on the nerves as you grow cold about the feet and hands, and think you hear whisperings and flutterings of strange things.

At least, that is what always happens to me.

And it happened so last night.

I was growing quite frightened, and had begun to peep round the candles at the dark corners, and to watch the curtains nervously, and to wish I was safe in bed with the bedclothes drawn up, when suddenly there came to my ears one of those great whirling gusty sounds which tell you that a door or a window had suddenly been thrown open or blown open in the wind.

I sprang to my feet and listened.

The noise did not die down, but left off as suddenly as it had risen, and then there was complete silence, and I, throwing open my window to listen, could make out nothing whatever, no rustling of branches, or footsteps, or voices, or anything to show that any one was about.

I was at first almost inclined to persuade myself that it was only an unusually strong gust of wind among the trees that I had heard, when another sound, this time unmistakably from the inside of the house, and under my own room, came to my ears.

It was as if some article of furniture, a chair or small table, had been thrown down.

I closed my window and ran to the door, but there I stopped to think.

The room under mine is papa's study, which has two windows and a half-glass door into the garden. When he is at home, he walks in and out on to the terrace, and the door is almost always half-open. But when he is away nobody ever uses the door, and it is kept locked.

Was it that door which I had heard the wind whistle through? And if so, who had opened it?

At first I thought I would summon Lindsay, who sleeps in Kelly's old room upstairs, where the bell from my room rings.

But then I remembered how nervous she is, and that Harriet, who has plenty of pluck, would be a better confidante.

So taking up a flat candlestick, I lit the candle in it, and went out into the corridor, making as much noise as I could, to keep up my own courage.

Harriet was sleeping — or I thought she was — in one of the big spare rooms at the front of the house, on the opposite side to my room.

I could not help thinking, as I went quickly across, of the last time when I went out of my room at night to go to hers and of what I found out.

I knocked loudly, and called out :

"Harriet! Harriet!"

But there was no answer, and I then tried the handle of the door.

It was not locked, and I went in.

It is one of the big, old-fashioned rooms, one I love, and it has not been "restored" or "improved" much. The big four-post bedstead, with the flowered hangings, still stands against one wall, and the old satin-wood furniture, so different from the gaudy imitations in the West End shops, still fills the room, as it has done for half a century.

"Harriet!" I called out, sharply.

Again there was no answer, and I walked a little way into the room, and lifted my candle high above my head to look at the bed.

It was empty, and it had not been slept in.

"Harriet! Harriet!" I called again.

My voice sounded thin and sharp and almost unrecognizable as my own. For I was so horribly frightened and shocked that I was for the moment almost light-headed and scarcely aware of what I was doing.

"Harriet! Harriet!"

My voice seemed to echo in the big room, and after standing a moment, sick with alarm and agitation, I ran out of the room so hastily that the candle in my hand went out and I was left in the dark.

I was possessed by the horrible fear that she had come to the determination to make away with herself, and that the noise I had heard had been made by Harriet herself in opening the garden-door of the study to let herself out.

She spoke to me yesterday of suicide, and certainly she was much excited when she bade me good night, and I have heard that people who have made up their minds to make away with themselves are often particularly bright and lively just before they do it.

I had seen her looking out through the wind and rain during the afternoon at the little lake at the end of the slope of the lawn, and it flashed through my mind that she had even asked me how deep it was, and that I had told her there were holes in it deep enough to drown a man.

These thoughts possessed me as I stood for a few moments, in the middle of the corridor, half-dazed and uncertain what to do.

Should I rouse the house and go in search of her? But the suggestion had scarcely come to me before I decided that I had better lose no time in calling anybody, but go at once myself in the direction of the pond.

I had lost very little time since I first heard the opening of the door below, and I can run like the wind.

So I hurried along the corridor to the nearest staircase, the very one I was coming up that day when Sir Lionel caught me with old Kelly's mackintosh on and with my slipper off!

The remembrance of that day flashed into my mind, oddly enough, while I stumbled down towards the study.

All the doors of the downstairs rooms are locked on the inside at night; but the study-door opened at a touch, and entering, I knew at once that there was some one in the room with me.

"Harriet!" I cried, as I stumbled forward in the dark.

There was no answer, but as I looked round me, I saw, as it seemed a long way off, on my right hand, a tiny spark, and knew that there had been a light in the room which some one had just put out.

"Harriet!" I cried, and my voice sounded shrill and hoarse with fear. "Harriet! If you are there, don't be frightened. It's only me. It's Cecilia. Speak to me. I know you're here. Speak to me, and tell me what you were going to do. Were you—were you—going out to—to—" I lowered my voice and hissed out the last two words in a whisper—"to the lake? Were you going to do what you threatened?"

There was no answer, and again I was silent, and stood in the middle of the floor, horribly frightened, wondering whether it was really Harriet who was in the room with me, and whether she was—*dead!*

She had talked about taking some drug, and destroying her life that way. Had she done it?

There was a little match-box attached to my candlestick, and I began to fumble for a match, striking two before I could get a light. For my fingers were trembling so much that the matches broke in them.

Then, breaking suddenly upon my ear in the darkness, so that it gave me quite a shock, the voice of Harriet sounded.

"Don't, Cis, don't," she said quickly. "Don't strike a light. I—I thought I heard a noise, and I came downstairs to see what it was—you know how nervous I am about burglars—and I took you for a burglar when I heard you come in."

I had given a little scream of relief when I heard her voice, and now I said:

"Oh, Harriet, thank God you're all right! I heard a noise down here, like the door opening, and I thought

## 206 THE INDISCRETION OF LADY USHER

— I thought — you will laugh at me, but I thought you had gone out to drown yourself in the lake!”

She laughed loudly, and then suddenly broke off and said:

“Hush! Don’t let us make a noise. Let us go into the next room and see if there’s anybody there.”

“The next room! That’s the White Saloon. No. It isn’t there. I heard the noise, and it was in this room, I’m sure; let me strike a light.”

I fumbled again for the matches, and I heard Harriet coming towards me, feeling her way in the dark.

“No, no,” she said. “I’ve searched this room myself. I put my own candle out just as I heard you opening the door, when I took you for the burglar, my dear.”

And she laughed. But I could not feel reassured, as she seemed to be.

“Well,” said I, “we’d better see what we are about, hadn’t we?”

And again I tried to strike a match. But the moment I did so, Harriet leaped upon me, discovering my whereabouts by the little speck of light, and seized my hand.

“Better not,” she said. “Don’t you know the danger? They come with dark lanterns, and if you bring a light they can see to shoot at you.”

I thought this was nonsense.

“They can’t shoot at you,” I said impatiently, “if they’re not here. You say you’ve searched this room. Well, then, let us have a light to look at each other. Surely, surely you’re not nervous now I’m with you, if you had courage enough to come downstairs all by yourself!”

I tried to get away from her, for she was holding



my hands. She took away my candlestick, however, and again said:

"Better not have a light."

Then at last I began to suspect something.

"Oh!" I cried out in quite a different tone.

"What's the matter?" said Harriet nervously.

But I did not answer. By the thin line of faint light that I could see above the shutters of the windows and the garden-door, I could by this time make out in what part of the room I was standing. Letting her take my candlestick, therefore, I groped my way to one of the big leather chairs, that stand one on each side of the fire-place, and sat down in it. From this spot I could watch the door into the hall, and also the garden-door, and the windows, and none of them could be opened without my knowledge.

"What are you doing?" cried Harriet, in a sharper voice.

"Nothing," said I quite quietly.

For a moment she was silent, then she said in a voice which had altered a little, and in which I could detect a note of alarm:

"Hadn't you better come upstairs with me now? There was nothing, I think, after all, but a gust of wind outside."

"Very well," I said. "You go upstairs then, and I'll wait here a little while, and see what happens."

She spoke quite crossly.

"What happens! Why, all that will happen is that you will catch cold. Don't be silly, Cis, but come upstairs."

I made no answer. I was listening very intently, however, and I was almost sure that I heard sounds at the other end of the room.

"Who's that behind you?" I asked sharply, and so

suddenly that Harriet, who had been sitting on the arm of my chair, to which she had fumbled her way, withdrew her clinging arms from round my neck very abruptly.

"Behind me! Good gracious, how nervous you are! You make me nervous too! There's nobody!"

She had released me, and I took advantage of this to spring up and to feel my way to the mantelpiece, where I knew there was a match-box hanging on the wall at the corner.

"What are you doing? Where are you, Cis?" cried Harriet anxiously.

I made no answer. Moving as quietly as I could and taking care, all the while, not to turn my back to the other end of the room, I distinctly heard the faint buzz of a whisper, and guessed that it was a signal.

The next moment there came to my ears the noise of something being knocked down, and then the garden-door was opened and shut again so quickly that even I, now used to the darkness, and on the look-out, could make out no more than this, that somebody had gone out.

I flew across the room, overturning a chair with a crash, and tearing myself away from Harriet, who tried to intercept me.

I reached the garden-door, flung it open, and was out on the terrace before she could make a second attempt to detain me.

I saw no one, but I heard the crashing of boughs on the right, and I ran along the terrace, down the steps, and across the lawn, and tore through the shrubs and flowers to the walk that runs by the wall of the kitchen garden.

But I had lost the trail, and though I waited about and listened, and opened the door into the kitchen gar-

den, and peered through the rows of espaliers and between the old apple and pear trees, I saw and heard nothing more.

I went back slowly to the house, the hem of my dressing-gown heavy and wet with dew and mud, my slippers soaked through, and my teeth chattering.

Harriet, looking a dim and ghostly figure in her white dressing-gown, was leaning over the balustrade of the terrace. It was too dark for me to see her face, but the tone of her voice told me she was frightened.

"Oh, Cis," she cried, "what is it? Have you gone mad? Or did you really find a burglar?"

I made no answer. Running up the stone steps quickly, I avoided her, and fled across the terrace and into the house by the doorway through which I had come out, dashed through the study, flew up the stairs, and, locking myself into my own room, sat down to think about it all.

I had not dared to speak to her: it is better not to say anything when one feels as I did then. I sat for a little while in a fury of disgust, vexation, anger, and humiliation, and then went to bed, hoping with all my heart that she would have had the grace, when morning came, to take herself off before she could meet me.

But I did not yet know Harriet!

When I went down to breakfast she was already in the room, looking her very best in a charming morning-gown of rose-colored cashmere, much too handsome for the country, and smiling as sweetly at me as if nothing had disturbed either her or me since dinner-time yesterday.

She came forward with her hand held out and her cheek advanced, but I avoided her and took my seat

at the table, with a cold, "Good morning," which would have quelled anybody else.

It did not appear to disconcert Harriet in the least.

"Why, Cis, what's the matter with you this morning?" she inquired quite cheerfully. "Haven't you got over our fright of the night yet?"

She was taking her seat, smiling and bright, and stretching out her hand to the toast.

"No," I said, "I haven't got over it. I had hoped, Harriet, that you would have left the house this morning before I came downstairs."

She opened her beautiful eyes to their fullest extent, raised her eyebrows and stared at me with the coolest effrontery.

"Left the house!" she echoed, as if utterly amazed. "Did you think then that I was going away to-day? Can't you stand me for more than one night?"

My mouth felt parched, and I could scarcely get the words out, but I knew how vital a matter it was, and I had to get the thing done with somehow, and as quietly as possible. I looked at her, blushing to the roots of my hair, and panting as if I had just been running up a steep hill.

"Harriet," I said, "it is of no use to look at me and speak to me like that. I know all about it."

She only opened her eyes more widely still. She was the very burlesque of innocence.

"All about what?"

"I know why you got me to ask you to stay here, and I know who it was you let into the house — and out again — last night."

She knitted her brows with a smile and a look which implied that I had touched the lowest depths of imbecility.

"Let into the house! And out again! Last night! Me! My dear Cis, hadn't you better see a doctor?"

Her effrontery, her calmness, when it was all I could do not to choke and to scream, irritated me to the verge of frenzy. That I should have been sorry for her, that I should have taken her into my father's house and given her shelter and support, when she was capable of such folly and wickedness as this!

I had to support myself against the table, on which I leaned with both hands, as I bent forward and looked at her intently over the coffee-pot.

"It's of no use to bluff it, Harriet, because I saw and I heard," I spoke with unusual energy and saw that Harriet was surprised as she leaned back in her chair. She had now grown just a little pinker, but compared to my red face and clutching hands, her own features were perfectly calm and her demeanor dignified and majestic.

"My dear Cis," she said coolly, "I am very sorry that your imagination should have run away with you like this. At least, I hope it is your imagination, and that this is not just a clever little stratagem to get rid of an unwelcome guest. Of course, I know that my situation makes me a mark for calumny, but"—here she took out her pocket-handkerchief and wiped her eyes—"I didn't think you would be the first person to throw a stone at me. But it's the old story: every one is ready to hit a man when he's down. Besides, if I did meet Lord Hugh, where's the harm? I told you before he is a friend and he sympathizes with me, sympathy is to me the very breath of life. Oh, you are cold as ice, you don't understand. I am wretched!"

I was watching her attentively, and I knew that she

was not shedding tears, for her handkerchief was perfectly dry and her eyes were not even red.

I was much too angry now to be tricked into blindness.

"I wish it were my imagination," I said, taking no notice of her suggestions. "But it's not, you know."

Putting away her pocket-handkerchief, she sat up.

"What is it you accuse me of?" she asked blandly. "Pray don't make any attempt to spare my feelings. Say what you mean, in so many words."

"I'd rather not."

"I insist."

"How can I say more than I've said? The man you let into the house last night was your lover."

She looked at me steadily.

"Or yours," she said.

I gasped.

"You dare to say such a thing to me?"

"Why not? You can't deny that you've received clandestine visits from a man. It's all over the place."

I stared at her.

"Harriet, you must be dreaming."

"Oh, no, I'm not. I've been told it's well known some man comes to see you here. I don't know his name; I never inquired. But anyhow, as I say, it's known, and although I think you're quite right to deny it, of course it can be proved."

There flashed into my mind the remembrance of Sir Arnold Banbury's silly visit, and I knew at once who it was that had suggested it. But I was not going to argue the point with Harriet, or to accuse her. The scene we were going through was disagreeable enough: I had no intention of turning it into a wrangle.

I poured out the coffee, and tried to eat something, without addressing another word to her.

Why should I discuss such a delicate matter with a woman whom I now despised too heartily to care what she said or what she thought? I now knew that it was she who had put it into the silly head of Sir Arnold to pay me what she hoped might prove a compromising visit, and I was thankful for the common sense which had caused me to lead him through the house, instead of allowing him to sneak away across the park.

I felt that Harriet was disappointed at the way in which I received her insulting accusation. She began to eat hurriedly, and lost the calmness which she had shown till then.

When she had finished breakfast she sprang up and looked at me defiantly.

"And now," she said, "I suppose I have to go?"

"Yes, if you please," said I.

"You are very hard and unforgiving, you are worse than Sir John; you, as a woman, ought to know better, you ought to understand my loneliness. Why in these days can't a woman—I am not a girl—have at least one male friend with whom to discuss her troubles? It is monstrous that you should suspect me of aught calling for censure. I repeat you are horribly unfeeling—horribly unfeeling!" Then, quite suddenly, she gave a little hard laugh, and went quickly past me out of the room.

That was the last I saw of her, but I have a very uneasy feeling that I shall hear a good deal more about her.

As she came without any luggage whatever, and had to get all she wanted from me while she stayed,

she had no difficulty in going away, and when luncheon was announced I learned that she had left the house some time before, after looking out a train in the A B C.

I don't know whether I am more glad that she is gone, or sorry that she came at all. I am disgusted at her behavior, but after all I have no right to be, since I knew her so well.

And, shocking as it is that she should have abused my kindness to her, I knew that she had used other people in the same way, and I have no right to be surprised.

I have not been able to rest ever since I saw her last.

When she first came, of course I, delighted to know that I was wrong in thinking she was seeing Gerald, was a little inclined to think I had been too hard upon her. Now, however, I am completely puzzled about several things.

I wonder why she should have come here to meet this man — and I wonder whether it was Lord Hugh she let into the house!

And now I am troubled about Gerald again. I have not had a letter from him since the third, four days ago; I got a tiny note yesterday morning, sent from the office, saying he was too busy to write, but that he was well, and hoped I was enjoying myself, but that was not a proper letter, and didn't count.

He said he was leaving town for a day or two, but that he should soon be back. I wonder if he is back, and I wonder whether he will believe this story about Harriet!

I must tell him all about it now, and everything besides. But how is it that she doesn't seem to be afraid of that? I should have thought she would have



been extra careful with me, knowing what I know, and that the obligation upon me to keep the secret about Cowes only holds good as long as she behaves properly!

Why didn't she appeal to me again, and remind me of that? It looks as if she didn't mind my telling people now!

Or is it only that she doesn't mind my telling Gerald?

Oh, I don't want to be jealous, and of a woman like Harriet; but I can't help it, I can't, I can't.

I have a great mind to go up to town to-day to try to see Gerald before anybody else can come between us, to make mischief.

I will go. I'll go at once, and catch the four-something train!

CURZON STREET,  
*October 8th.*

I CAME up to town yesterday, but met with nothing but disappointment. I didn't even bring Lindsay with me, so I made all sorts of mistakes, got into the wrong train, and left half my things behind me, and got to Curzon Street cold and tired and cross, to find the place looking very wretched and deserted, and to be told that Gerald went away yesterday, and would not be home for a night or two.

I got Jackson to bring me a cup of tea, which I had in my room, in the middle of covered-up furniture, and then I telephoned to the office, only to be told that Mr. Gerald Calstock was away and not expected back for a day or two.

It makes me feel very foolish to be told by everybody that my husband is away! I can't help feeling that they must think I ought to have known, not only that he was away, but where he is.

I *ought* to have known, and the consciousness that Gerald is keeping something from me is growing stronger and stronger.

I feel so anxious and alarmed that I can't spend another day all by myself. I daren't go to mamma; she would find out too much. But I think I will wire to papa. There is something soothing about dear old papa! And he never finds anything out, or if he does, he doesn't rub one up the wrong way with the things he says, as the clever people do!

The worst of it is, one never knows where to find

him. I must wire or telephone to all his clubs, and to Newmarket, and to his chambers. And very likely I shan't be able to get at him after all.

It was horrid to have to stay in the house alone last night, and to have breakfast by myself this morning. If I don't get an answer from papa when I have tried to find him, I shall have to go and see mamma, and trust to luck not to let her know anything.

But I don't feel as if I could stay here another day all alone, and after that horrible experience with Harriet I feel as if Fouroaks had been spoilt for me too!

Oh, it is horrible that I have no one to turn to, even now that I am married to the man I love!

FOUROAKS,

*October 9th.*

BACK again at the old place, and things are better, because I have discovered papa, and he is coming here to-night. He came to see me at Curzon Street last night, just when I was going upstairs to bed. He was very affectionate, and very much surprised to see me by myself; but I told him nothing, because he asked me the same questions about ten times over, so that I had to decide that he was scarcely in the psychological condition desirable in a confidant.

However, I arranged that he should come down to Fouroaks to spend a few days with me, and, so that he should not forget all about it, I wrote it carefully in his pocket-book for him, so:

“Must remember that I have to go down to stay with Cis at Fouroaks, and that she expects me by the three-thirty-five train, that gets down there by seven, and the dogcart will meet me.”

Papa laughed while I was writing this, and told me I was taking unnecessary trouble. But he would have forgotten all about it if I hadn't.

FOUROAKS,

*October 10th.*

I THOUGHT papa's visit would have made me happy, but it has not. He came yesterday, and I saw at once that he was anxious and depressed about something, for he was in a very different mood from that of the night before.

I saw that he had something on his mind, but at first I would not let him tell me what it was.

"Look here, Papa," I said, when he had got down out of the dogcart, and taking my arm, led me at once towards the stables, "I'm not going to talk about anything disagreeable — yet. Let us have a nice stroll through the grounds, and go and look at the horses, and have dinner cosily in the library. Then, afterwards, we will be solemn and sad and take out all the old bogeys, trot them out and lay them to rest if we can. But — let's have a little bit of the old times first."

"By Jove, Cis, that's right. That's philosophy! I only wish I could practice a little more of it myself. Yes, come on, Cis, let's have a look at the gees, and talk turnips for a bit. It's awfully restful to talk turnips!"

And so we did, walking together arm-in-arm, and laughing at old family anecdotes, and enjoying ourselves very much, in spite of the sort of cloud which we felt to be hanging over us.

We had a delightful dinner, with the old dogs in the room, and then we had the table cleared, and

settled ourselves by the fire, papa in a big arm-chair, and I on the tiger at his feet with old Prince, the Newfoundland, licking my hand.

"Well, Cis, this is like the old times, isn't it?" said papa, as he took out a cigar, and I lit it for him and took the first puff myself.

But I couldn't say "Yes" to that. I shook my head gravely, and he looked solemn too.

"By Jove!" he said, slowly, and then he said it again.

This was unusual caution on his part, and I suddenly sprang up on my knees in front of him.

"Papa," said I, "I wish you'd tell me all you know."

He looked horribly startled, poor old dear! And he looked at me out of the corners of his dear blue eyes, and said:

"What do I know, Cis? Eh? What about, my dear?"

"Well, about — Gerald, for one thing, and about — Harriet Usher, for another."

He frowned and looked gloomy directly.

"Well, my dear child," he said, "I'm surprised at you. I thought you were such a sensible girl to try to know nothing, and to forget everything and to let us take life easy for a bit. And now you must go and spoil it all by questions like those!"

"But, Papa, they are questions that have to be answered, aren't they?"

He shook his head.

"I'm afraid they answer themselves," said he. "I shouldn't have thought it possible that a man could have the heart to neglect my pretty little Cis, but by Jove, the more you know of men, the less you think of 'em! Only you do get the luck of it, my dear, to

get two, one after the other! Bless my soul, it's — it's scandalous, that it is."

If his sympathy was soothing, his words were not. My heart seemed to sink lower and lower as he went on with these terrible words, which seemed to confirm my worst fears.

But I persisted in being incredulous.

"Nothing will make me believe," I said obstinately, "that Gerald is a bad husband. I know he is overworked, and that he likes to keep his business worries to himself. But I won't believe any worse of him than that"—and then I had to add rather weakly—"without the very strongest proof."

I was looking anxiously at papa. He smoked on in silence for a few minutes, and then asked abruptly:

"What proof do you want?"

My heart sank again. What did he mean?

"Have you heard anything more?" I asked in a whisper, losing all my confidence and all my firmness suddenly.

He frowned as he answered.

"I took him to task myself only a day or two ago, when I heard that you had gone down to Four-oaks. I asked him point-blank if he was working for Sir John Usher, or for Harriet, or for both of them."

"Well, what did he say?"

Papa looked rather ruffled.

"He didn't put it quite like that, but he practically told me to mind my own business," said he.

"Well, and what did you do?"

Papa looked at me ruefully, but with a little twinkle in his blue eyes at the same time.

"My dear, there was nothing for it but to take his advice—and to mind my own business," he said.

I sat down on the floor again, sighing.

"And don't you know what this business is that has taken him away?" I asked.

"Something about a big jewel robbery, I understood. But he wouldn't tell me where it had taken place, or anything about it. And if I were you, Cis, I shouldn't ask. He's one of those secretive chaps that you can't worm anything out of — lawyers are like that, you know."

"But you think it's something to do with the Ushers?" I said abruptly, ignoring his moralizing.

"Well, yes, I do."

I was puzzled as well as distressed. Surely, surely, Gerald could not know what sort of woman Harriet was, or he would not think of taking her part! But, was he taking it?

"And do you know, for a certainty, that he is doing work for Harriet, as well as Sir John, or instead of him?" I asked.

"I know that he's been visiting her, and there was a letter in her handwriting on his table in the office, when I called upon him."

I was much troubled. Knowing the attraction he had himself expressed for her, and how fascinating Harriet can be when she likes, I was alarmed to think of the mischief she might make, if she had obtained any strong influence over him, by relating her account of her stay at Fouroaks to Gerald, before I could reach him with mine.

In a frenzy at the thought of what she might say and what he might believe, I started up, and beating my hands together, showed so much distress that papa was quite frightened, and drawing me down on to the arm of his chair, tried to comfort me in a way that was no comfort at all, but quite the reverse, by



assuring me that men were all alike, and that the sooner one understood that and didn't care, the happier one naturally became.

I told him it was not my view of married happiness, and I grew quite snappish, so that poor papa looked at me ruefully, and remarked that marriage didn't always improve a woman.

"I must find out where he is," I said abruptly. "I must write to him, go to him."

"Why not wait till he comes back to town?" argued my father. "Never meet trouble half-way, or a husband or wife you don't get on with either."

"But we do get on! We always have got on," I pleaded. "I love Gerald, Papa. I love him with all my heart, and I shall be miserable if it's true that he likes some one else better than m — m — me!" I sobbed out.

He caressed my head, for I had come back to him.

"Never be miserable about a man, my girl. Depend on it he's not worth it. You see, it's like this, Cis. If a man's worth caring about he'll stick to you, and you needn't worry yourself. If he's not worth it, he won't stick to you — and then you needn't worry yourself either. Do you see?"

I bowed my head to satisfy him, but nothing shall persuade me that Gerald is not worth caring about, even if he does admire that horrible, wicked Harriet. I slid down into my old place at his knee, and let papa prose on about men and women and marriage, all of which he is very wise about, in theory, though he has never made very good use of his wisdom, I think!

With all the worry we were suffering from, papa and I had really a happyish sort of evening together, for even though I didn't tell him quite everything — because I doubt his power of keeping a secret — there

is something comfy and nice in knowing one is with some one who really loves one, even if he doesn't know how to help one very much.

We were very sentimental and lachrymose at times; but yet I felt, when I had wished him good night, and kissed his dear, kind, handsome old face, as if being with him had done me good.

This morning at breakfast I told him I had made up my mind to go back to Curzon Street, and he nodded gravely, and said it was just as well.

So we are going to have another stroll round the place, and then we shall go up to town together.

CURZON STREET,

*October 12th.*

WHAT am I to think? I have had, first, a lot of worry and vexation, all through that wicked Harriet, and now a knockdown blow.

When papa and I came up together from Fouroaks, I meant to stay quietly here, waiting for Gerald's return, so that I might obtain a hearing from him as soon as possible. I had not heard from him again, and in my own letter, written at Fouroaks, I had been so reserved that I was sure he would guess there was something wrong. I could not trust the story about Harriet to the post, so I only said that I had a great deal of very important news for him, and I underlined "important."

But then a man thinks the only news we consider important is about hats!

However, as I have always denied that I knew anything against Harriet, I can't make full confession of my knowledge in a letter.

I passed a quiet day and went to the theater with papa in the evening. It was a musical comedy that we went to see, and we were in a box near the stage. I do wish the chorus-girls wouldn't wink at papa! It is very embarrassing for me, and it makes everybody in the stalls look up, to see whom he is with!

Yesterday I had a quiet morning with my books and birds, and had luncheon rather cosily by myself. Then, afterwards, when I had written again to Gerald, directing it to the office, as I have to do, I was

just going up to dress for a drive when mamma ran in, breathless and excited, looking more like a young girl than my mother!

She burst out with:

"Oh, Cis, Cis, what's this I hear about you? You of all people! Of course I've told them it's not true, but they won't believe it, and Lady Langbourne is most irritating with her smiles and nods."

"What do you mean, Mamma?" I said.

But I was very red, and frightened, for I began to guess what sort of calumny it was that was being spread abroad about me, and I knew too who it was that had started it.

"Oh, you know, you must know. They say you went down to Fouroaks so that you could see some one who visited you there! Of course, I said it was absurd, and Lady Langbourne pretended to agree with me. But all the while that she was saying how foolish it was, one could see that she believed it. And she called you a little Puritan! That was nasty, wasn't it?"

I was overwhelmed.

"Did she say who it was told her the story?" I asked as calmly as I could.

"No. I asked her, but she pretended she didn't remember. Now, really, Cis, you can trust me, you know. What is it you've been doing?"

I hesitated. For a moment I was going to tell her everything, but then I thought it better to keep the whole story for Gerald's ears in the first place. Now, that I am utterly resolved to make a clean breast of it to him, and to tell him how Harriet has behaved from first to last, it seems wisest to keep it all to myself till I see him.

"I've done nothing," I said quietly. "What did you suppose I'd done?"

Mamma looked at me out of the corners of her eyes.

"You've been down at Fouroaks," she said inquisitorially.

"Yes."

"Have you been quite alone all the time?"

"Oh, no. First, Sir Arnold Banbury called upon me," I began, with a bold front.

I expected that mamma would utter a scream, but she did not. And I began to feel rather cold.

"Who else?" said she.

"Why, that horrid Harriet came down, and persuaded me to let her spend a night there," I said.

"Yes, yes, I know. Who else?"

I stared at mamma.

"You have seen her then?"

"Yes. This morning."

"And she told you this pretty story about me, and you believed it?"

Mamma shook her head.

"She has told me nothing," she said. "Except that she said it was rather indiscreet of you to receive visits from Sir Arnold Banbury."

I was puzzled.

"Who was it told you this preposterous story about me then? That I was receiving visits from anybody else?"

"It was old Lady Langbourne who told me."

"And who told her?"

"I don't know. I couldn't find out."

"It was either Harriet herself, or else it was that odious Lord Hugh Hawkhurst," said I.

My mother compressed her lips tightly.

"How on earth could you let such a man as that come to see you at Fouroaks, when your husband was away?" she asked.

I gasped.

"Visit me!" I cried. "How can you talk such nonsense, Mamma! If Lord Hugh was there at all—which is certainly possible—it was at night, unknown to me—and to see Harriet."

Mamma looked at me steadily.

"Ask yourself," she said quietly, "whether it is reasonable to suppose Harriet would be so mad as to let him visit her—at Fouroaks, of all places, in the present condition of her affairs."

"It may seem impossible to you," I said, "but it's true, for all that. I have every reason to believe that he did visit her there. I know somebody did. And who else could it be?"

Mamma raised her eyebrows.

"It comes to this, I suppose," she said dryly, "that you each give a different version of the same story."

I was aghast.

"And don't you know whose story it is that ought to be believed?" I asked, my voice becoming so hoarse and so broken that I could scarcely get out the words.

Mamma waved her hand about in the air, in the way she does when she is worried.

"What does it matter what I believe?" she asked fretfully. "It is what everybody else believes that matters."

"And would anybody believe Harriet against me?" I asked.

Mamma turned to stare at me.

"Why, of course they would," she said quietly.

"Harriet is a great deal older than you are, and a great deal cleverer. She could get ten people to believe her against one who would believe *you*."

The way in which mamma said this, with such a quiet air of conviction, frightened me horribly. Is it really as she says, that people will think I am as bad as Harriet? I can't believe it, and yet it is awful to hear one's own mother taking it for granted that they will.

I could not speak for a little while; I just sat down and looked out of the window, while mamma walked to the nearest mirror and altered the tilt of her hat. Then she came across the room to me again.

"You had better go at once to Lady Langbourne's," she said, "and give her your version of the story."

I was indignant of course. As if one's indignation ever affected mamma!

"I shouldn't think of going to her," I said. "If Lady Langbourne or anybody else chooses to be so foolish as to think me capable of such dreadful things, they are welcome to think so. Besides, you say yourself that Harriet would be believed rather than me."

"But we mustn't go to sleep about it. It is absolutely necessary that you should put yourself right with Lady Langbourne."

"If all I've heard is true, Lady Langbourne isn't a person who has any right to be a censor of other people's conduct," I said. "And so she isn't a person who matters."

Mamma slapped my shoulder impatiently.

"Oh, my dear Cis," she said, "I do wish you wouldn't talk as if you'd just come out of the ark!" she said. "Whatever Lady Langbourne may have been like in her youth, that is over long ago, and nobody dreams of raking it up against her now that

she has one of the nicest places in the country, and quite the best cook in London! You positively must put yourself right with her. She is the very soul of good-nature, and if she only takes your part, she will stick to you, and bring you through the scrape triumphantly."

I was furious with mamma for treating the matter like this, as if it were not a question of my character against the word of a woman like Harriet, but a toss-up which of us should be whitewashed at the expense of the other!

"Mamma," I said earnestly, "I don't understand you. Do you really think me capable of these dreadful things?"

"I think you capable of being very foolish," she answered sharply. "Otherwise you wouldn't have let Harriet get hold of Lady Langbourne before you. Now you may have hard work to get her to drop Harriet."

The words sent a cold shiver down my back. It suddenly became, not a question of the truth, but of the inevitable two sides, and I was appalled to think of the scandal that would be raging, not only among our friends, but all over London, and of the things which would be said not only of Harriet, who deserves them, but of me, when I do not.

I stood up, feeling stiff and cold.

For a few moments I couldn't speak, and mamma stood as if not quite knowing what to make of me. At last I sobbed out:

"Gerald will believe me!"

But mamma's eyes grew round.

"Will he?" she said ominously.

"Of course he will," I burst out, finding my voice.

"Do you think he can be talked over by a — a —"



I stopped, for I saw mamma smiling grimly, and I remembered all my own fears. The thought that perhaps Harriet had got hold of Gerald already, and estranged him from me completely, was too awful. I tried to speak, and sank down again into the chair, just able to keep back my tears, but no more.

Mamma took the opportunity of my weakness to lay her hand earnestly on my shoulder, and to say:

"Go to Lady Langbourne without delay, there's a dear. Go with me, if you like. She is the most inveterate old gossip, and though she is good-natured, her good-nature may tell against you instead of for you, now Harriet has got hold of her first."

I rebelled. It was shocking that my reputation, my happiness, should be menaced by a woman whose own husband doesn't trust her near his children, and another woman whose advocacy seems to be only a matter of caprice!

"No," I said, "I won't go and see her. I won't see anybody, or talk to anybody, till I've seen Gerald."

"Where *is* your husband?"

That was the last straw. The knowledge that I could only answer that I did not know struck me with such an acute sense of the helplessness of my own position that I broke down into tears. Mamma tried to soothe me, rubbing me up the wrong way in the most careful manner.

"There, there, child, don't cry. It will be all right. Mr. Calstock is away on business, of course, and it's not at all likely that this story will reach his ears before you see him."

I raised my head. The suggestion in this speech made me still angrier than I had felt before.

"If he were to hear it a hundred times," I said,

"he would know it was too absurd to be listened to, and he would take it for granted that my own people and my own friends would think so too."

Mamma shrugged her shoulders.

"Of course, of course, child," she said. "How can a man of business, moving in quite a different circle from ours, know how these things are looked upon by us?"

"It seems to me," I said, "that any way of looking at them is more sensible than Lady Langbourne's way."

"I don't want to argue, my dear, and as you won't take my advice it is of no use for me to stay here. I must go and see Lady Langbourne myself—"

"Why make so much fuss about the opinion of one old woman?" I asked scornfully.

"Because, my dear Cis, it is old women who rule society, and she is one of the most important of those who do. Very few of us are really rich till we grow old, and without money we are without influence. Lady Langbourne has both. There, don't make your eyes red, but think over what I've said, and do, do, dear child, make up your mind to be wise."

She kissed me and went away, and I sent off a messenger to Gerald's office, with a telegram, which I begged might be sent to him at once. I just said, "Most important for me to see you at once. Am at Curzon Street."

I do pray that he will come!

Surely, surely he will believe the truth! But whatever he believes, I must see him, for I can't bear this horrible suspense of mystery and doubt any longer!

He must come, he must, he must!

CURZON STREET,

*October 13th.*

I DON'T know what is going to happen, and at this moment I feel that I don't care.

Yesterday was the most terrible day I have ever gone through, and now I feel as if I were already dead, as if, though I may go on living, for years and years, I shall never be able to feel anything any more.

I know, even as I write, that I can't go on living like this, that it would be impossible for any human being to bear what I am going through now if it were not for the knowledge that it can't go on for ever.

To-morrow, perhaps, something will happen, something I cannot foresee, which will alter everything and make life bearable. But now it seems as if life were over for me, and as if I have felt too much pain, humiliation, and wretchedness during the past few hours to be able to feel any more as long as I live.

When I wired to Gerald, or rather, when I got the people at the office to wire to him yesterday, I hoped to get a reply before night; but I got none, and then I was really alarmed; and when papa came, soon after seven, to take me out to dinner, I was in a fearfully nervous state.

I was dressing when I was told he had come, and I had him shown up into my boudoir, and I threw on a dressing-gown and went to see him.

But the moment I got into the room, before either of us had time to speak, I knew that something was wrong. He was walking up and down the room im-

patiently, which is not at all like papa. And when he wheeled round to meet me, I saw, by the look on his face, that he had heard something.

I wanted to greet him as usual, and to reassure him; for he looked as if he wanted comfort. But I couldn't. And as he looked at me, with such anxious eyes, as if he would read into my very heart, I faltered in the words I had ready, and stopped.

"Oh, Cis, what's it all about?" he asked, in such a tender, kind voice, that it was just the last straw.

I leaped at him, and hid my face in his shoulder and cried.

He stroked my head, and spoke broken words of comfort to me, but his hand was shaking and his voice was quite hoarse.

"There, there, Cis, don't cry," he said. "It's all right, it's all right! These silly tales, they're all lies, aren't they, dear? It's all right, isn't it, my dear?"

That was just the right thing to say, and I was, oh, so grateful, after what mamma had said. I looked up and nodded, wiping my eyes.

"Of course, it's all right," I said. "Only, only, Papa, it's dreadful to hear about all this gossip and scandal, when — when —"

"It's all that confounded Harriet Usher," said he, in a deep, full voice of indignation. "I'm sure it was she who set this tale going. She's a dangerous woman, Cis, and it's a thousand pities you ever allowed her to stay at Four Oaks with you."

I dashed away the last trace of my tears, feeling as if my anger had dried them up. Then I dragged papa across the room and made him sit down by the fire, and I threw myself down on the rug, and looked into his face, and said:

"Tell me just what they are saying, just what you've heard."

He frowned pitifully.

"'Pon my soul, I don't like to," he said.

"Never mind, you must."

"Well, well, as far as I can make out, there's some lying story going about your seeing that sweep Hawk-hurst down at Fouroaks."

I nodded.

"He did actually go there, I believe," said I, "but it was not to see me."

"That's what I guessed. I've a good mind to go down to Shire Place, to tell Sir John all about it. There'll be a family scandal anyhow, but at least my little Cis will be set right."

I put up a warning finger. I like laying down the law to papa, and seeing the simple way in which he listens and seems quite ready to obey me. I wonder why mamma never thought it worth while to be as nice to him as she can be to other people! Papa is so easy to lead just any way one wants him to go, and he is such a dear!

"Don't do anything, or tell anybody anything," I said, "until I've seen Gerald."

"But the fellow's away. And I believe he's been got hold of too, by this minx," said papa.

"Well, even if that is true, you may be sure he won't allow Harriet to put the blame of the things she's done on my shoulders."

"I wouldn't be too sure, my dear. A man is wax in the hands of a designing woman," said he.

"You're wax, you mean, Papa," said I, patting his cheek. "I don't think Gerald is."

"Well, perhaps lawyers are different from other

men, though I'm afraid you'll find they're not," said he.

"Anyhow, I want you to wait," I said, "until I've seen him, before you go to see Sir John. I feel as if I were wandering in a forest, Papa, and as if only Gerald could help me to find the way out."

Papa looked doubtful.

"More likely to want to lead you farther in, my dear, if he's got entangled by this woman," he said warningly.

"Well, well, I don't feel very happy, or very confident, as you know," I said. "But yet I can't feel as if all hope were gone until I've seen him again, and laid all this before him, and heard what he's got to say."

"I don't suppose he'll say much. He's too d——d artful," said papa. "What does he mean by running away like this without letting you know where he is? And why can't he tell you what the business is that's taken him away?"

"Well, wait, just wait. I can't think he will let me suffer, for Harriet or anybody else."

"Oh, I'll wait, if you wish. But it's hard you should have to be mixed up in Harriet's affairs, my poor little Cis!"

I didn't want to get out, but papa insisted it would do me good, and so I dressed and we dined together at a restaurant.

And when he brought me back and kissed me and said good-by, and told me to cheer up, I did feel a little comforted, and began, under the influence of his kindness and his cheerfulness, to hope that things would turn out all right.

This morning I got a letter from Gerald, telling me he would be home soon after luncheon, but that

he would only be in town a few hours, as he had to go away on business again at once.

The postmark of the letter was "London," and this seemed very strange. And then I noticed that the letter had been folded down at one end, so that it had evidently been enclosed to some one, who had been instructed to post it to me.

I don't think I should have noticed these little details at any other time, but now they were significant to me, and I could not help wondering why it was that Gerald had found it necessary to take such elaborate precautions to prevent my knowing where he was. And I looked carefully at the postmark, and I believe he sent the letter to his office, that it got there this morning, and was posted at once. For I received it at midday.

Naturally this worried me a good deal, and made me read the letter over again in a different mood.

It seemed to me that it was cold and cautious, and not so affectionate as usual. And then I went to my dressing-case, where I have kept the two other letters I've had from him locked up, and I looked at the envelopes and saw that they also had been enclosed, for the ends had been turned down in the same way, while the postmark was again "London."

I could not help feeling more frightened than ever when I had made sure of this. It seemed to make it so clear that Gerald thought it necessary to take great pains to hide from me where he was.

Why should he do that?

I have never been curious about his affairs, except where they concerned me.

I grew quite feverish with anxiety to see him, wondering what he would say when he heard the story

Harriet is spreading about me, and whether he would believe what I had to tell him about what happened at Cowes.

I couldn't help a horrible sinking at the heart, and I wished with all my heart I had never promised Harriet not to say anything about that night.

Of course, if I had told him everything just after it happened, he would have believed me; and although he would have been in a better position to help Sir John Usher to a divorce, and there would have been a family scandal, it would have been fairer than that there should be a scandal in which innocent persons are involved, as well as guilty ones.

Now, if Harriet had really got an influence over him, perhaps he would believe her rather than me, and think I had made up the story! A few days ago I should not have thought it possible that Gerald would doubt me; but I have heard so much since then about the way in which scandal spreads, and I have found out so much that is strange and suspicious about Gerald's behavior, that I could not feel easy in my mind.

Would he take Harriet's part still—and against me?

I had luncheon by myself, and was leaving the dining-room, when I heard the bell ring, and a man's voice I did not know speaking to Jackson in the hall.

Then I heard some one going upstairs, and Jackson came down again and told me that Sir John Usher had come, and that he had shown him into the drawing-room.

"You should have told him Mr. Calstock was away," I said.

"Yes, my lady, so I did," said Jackson; "but he



said he would like to see you, and that he wouldn't detain you above a few minutes."

I never felt more uncomfortable in all my life. What could he have to say to me? Would he ask me questions about Harriet? If so, how should I answer him?

I had been fixed in my determination to say nothing about the Cowes adventure to any one until I had told it to Gerald, and as for the night at Fouroaks, I dreaded speaking about that even more than the other, now that I knew the story she was telling.

Again, I was afraid he might want to know where Gerald was, and that would put me in a greater difficulty than ever. For, if I were to tell him the truth, that I did not know, it would make him suspicious directly. And I had long since begun to fear that he might already have doubts of Gerald, as I myself had.

But I would not let him know that. Whatever Gerald had been doing, he should not get into difficulties with his clients through anything I might say.

In the meantime, as I stood hesitating, I could hear the impatient tread overhead, and I knew that I must go and see this man, of whom I had heard such dreadful accounts from Harriet.

So I put on the most cheerful expression I could, and went upstairs, my heart sinking more at every step.

In the drawing-room I found a rather thickset middle-aged man, with a grave, handsome face.

At once I saw, even before either of us spoke, that Harriet did not do him justice when she described him. Whatever Sir John Usher may be, he is no "soulless clod," I am quite sure, and I say this after having gone through a terrible ordeal with him.

He spoke in a mild voice, but his eyes blazed with

passion, and I felt that to be the object of his anger would be a terrible thing.

And then, even while he spoke to me, it struck me that I myself *was* one of the objects of his anger.

"I am sorry to have to intrude upon you, Lady Cecilia," he said; "but as Mr. Calstock has not yet returned, I should be much obliged if you would, yourself, afford me some information upon a point about which you are better informed than I am."

I felt horribly frightened.

"I know nothing whatever about business, Sir John," I began.

But he cut me short, still looking at me in the same terrible way, as if he would read my thoughts, and making me feel that it would be impossible to tell him anything but the truth.

"Of course not. I don't talk of business to ladies. But you can answer a few simple questions about your movements — and your husband's, can you not?"

I hesitated. This was just what I did not want to do. He frowned, and stared intently into my face. I felt, in spite of the anger in his eyes and the peremptory and antagonistic way in which he spoke to me, that Harriet had not told the truth about her husband, any more than she did about anything else. He was certainly not the cold, soulless clod she had represented him to be, without affection for anything but his business and his hobbies. On the contrary, he seemed to me to be altogether warm-blooded, hot-tempered, eager, and alert; and even while he spoke to me sharply, and frowned at me, and while it occurred to me that he was jealous of Gerald, I felt that his anger was just, and that his jealousy was a natural and right jealousy.

"I think you'd better call again to-morrow, when

"Mr. Calstock is here," I said. "Or write to him and make an appointment."

He interrupted me quite curtly:

"Of course I can do that. But in the meantime kindly answer my questions."

"Really, I must decline."

I had moved to go, but he came between me and the door, and said:

"May I ask why you refuse to answer without having heard what my questions are?"

I was confounded. I tried to think the matter out, to decide what I had better do, and all the while I was wondering how I could get away without committing myself in any way, and without compromising Gerald. In the dark as I was as to his movements, it was yet, I felt, extremely necessary that Sir John should not know how ignorant my own husband was keeping me. For if Sir John were to know, what would he naturally think?

Jealous as I felt, I would not betray Gerald. And I would not condemn him unheard.

After a very uncomfortable pause, during which I could hear Sir John's breath coming very fast, and knew that he was working himself up into a great rage, I looked up and answered:

"It is very difficult for me to discuss a private matter with a perfect stranger, and I hope, Sir John, you will remember that, and that you will make an appointment with my husband, or with his partner — at the office."

My answer annoyed him, I think, for his tone was more abrupt than ever as he said:

"I think it is rather strange that you should not hear what I have to say. Although we have not met, we are connections. You are my wife's first cousin?"

"Yes," I had to admit.

"And you have always been on terms of intimacy with her?"

This was, I felt, a "fishing" question. I could feel the glance of his keen, fiery eyes upon me even while I looked at the carpet.

I made no answer to this, for I know what would follow if I did. He spoke again, more peremptorily than ever. I could not help noticing that he grew more and more abrupt, and even contemptuous in his manner of addressing me, as if he had come with the intention of veiling an intense dislike of me, which would peep out in spite of himself as he went on talking and growing more excited.

"You have brought accusations against her?" he suddenly said, in a loud and dictatorial tone.

I stood still, breathing heavily, and feeling that I was growing quite cold.

"I have said nothing about her, I have never said anything about any one—that is not true," I said.

"Tell me what you have said against her," he demanded fiercely.

But I shook my head.

"I will tell you nothing," I said, "until I have consulted my husband."

Sir John drew back a step, laughing contemptuously.

"Oh, you want his help, do you, in framing a discreet answer?" he said sarcastically.

At last the tone he was taking roused me to a show of spirit. I looked up and met his eyes.

"You have no right," I said, "to try to drag me into your quarrel with your wife."

"I am afraid I have a right," he said shortly, "but

if you will only answer my questions perhaps you may prove that I have not."

"I won't answer anything," I said.

"Very well. Then I must get the information I want from your husband, as you suggest."

The tone in which he said this left me no room for doubt that he was jealous of Gerald.

I felt cold with fear lest the two should meet without Gerald's having had any warning of what was in store for him. For the moment I forgot my own grievances, and could think of nothing but my fear on his account. I remember it surprised me that, at such a moment, all doubt of him faded suddenly, and gave place to anxiety, just as if there had never been a shadow of a cloud between us.

I changed my tone abruptly, and became very sweet and conciliatory.

"I'm quite sure that would be better," I said. "He will be back at the office to-morrow —"

"To-morrow!" interrupted Sir John. "I had understood it was to-day."

This was, I considered, a fortunate opening.

"Why not go to the office and see whether he has returned?" I suggested, as if struck by a happy thought.

I hoped that this might give me the opportunity I wanted of seeing Gerald alone, as I knew he was coming here first.

I think Sir John guessed I had some little plot in my mind, for he frowned and looked at me intently, without making any attempt to hide the fact that he mistrusted me.

"You don't want me to meet him," he said shortly.

I was silent, for I did not know what to say. Nor did it much matter whether I spoke or remained silent,

for it was plain that he did not believe a word I uttered.

"You had my wife with you at Lord Rushbury's place, Fouroaks?" he said abruptly.

"Yes, she stayed one night."

"Why did she visit you?"

"I—I—don't know. She is my cousin. Why should she not visit me?"

"You did not want her to stay there?"

I hesitated. I wondered what it was exactly that he wanted to know.

"Answer me, if you please, Lady Cecilia. Is it true that you did not wish her to stay there with you?"

"Yes, it is true."

"Will you tell me why?"

Again I was thrust into a corner. To tell him the real reason of my reluctance to have Harriet staying with me would be to tell him everything, and this I was resolved not to do until I had seen Gerald.

"Harriet and I have never been very intimate," I said, after a pause, which he knew was to give me time to make up something, "and I went down to Fouroaks to be entirely by myself."

Something in the glance he gave me, when I uttered these words, made me grow crimson, with a most uncomfortable feeling that he suspected me.

"And she insisted on staying? She pressed herself upon you?"

"She said she was lonely, that you would not let her go home, and she begged me to let her stay."

"And why did she come away the next day?"

I said nothing, and he repeated his question. At last I answered:

"We had a misunderstanding."

"A quarrel?"

"No, not exactly a quarrel."

"About something that had occurred — during the night?"

I was horribly startled, and I turned upon him, with fire in my eyes.

"She has told you something," I said quickly. "What is it?"

For a moment he did not answer me, and we stood facing one another, both greatly excited, each trying to fathom the thoughts of the other.

And while we were like that, not speaking a word, watching each other and ready to take advantage of the slightest movement that would count as an admission, we both heard rapid footsteps outside, and then I recognized them as Gerald's.

I turned and ran to the door, but it was too late.

The door burst open, and my husband came in. He was very pale, and looked lined and haggard, as he does when he is overworked or worried about anything.

"Sir John!" said he.

"Calstock!" said Harriet's husband, at the same moment.

I stood back, without speaking, watching them, when I tried to mumble a few words of explanation, to which neither of them appeared to listen.

There was something fascinating in the way in which they met each other. Both looked grave, anxious, stern, and angry.

"Why did you come here, Sir John, and not to my office?" said Gerald, taking the initiative, to my great relief.

"I telephoned to you there and learnt you were expected here," said Sir John shortly.

"Your business was with me, and not with Lady Cecilia," Gerald went on.

I thought Sir John looked rather disconcerted.

"I have apologized," said he, "for the intrusion."

"There was no need to intrude. If you will come downstairs into the study, we can talk there."

Sir John assented, bowed to me, and walked to the door. Gerald stayed behind for a couple of seconds. I think his first impulse was to give me a kiss, for till that moment he had given me no greeting whatever; but when he looked into my face, he changed his mind. I dare say I was looking fierce and not at all affectionate: the truth was I was eaten up by my anxiety.

"Why has he come?" I asked hoarsely.

Gerald drew back directly.

"I will go and see," he said.

He turned away without another word, and went downstairs so quickly after Sir John that he reached the hall at the same time.

I sank down upon the nearest sofa, trembling all over. What had happened? What was going to happen? Had Sir John come with the intention of finding out from me whether I had any suspicions of my husband? Or had he come only to catechise me on the subject of his wife?

That he was jealous I was sure. As for myself, I did not know, at that moment, whether I was jealous myself or not, for I was too much absorbed by anxiety on Gerald's account. Were the two men quarreling downstairs, in the study, where by this time they were closely shut in?

If so, was it on my account? Or was it on Harriet's?

I had lain some minutes on the sofa, feeling



utterly worn out and racked and tortured, when I heard the tinkling of the bell, and dragged myself to my feet.

If it was a visitor, I had given no instructions to Jackson, and mamma or papa, or any intimate friend might be shown up at once.

So I went towards the door to make my escape, when I was startled to hear some one running up the stairs very quickly, and then the voice of Harriet, speaking to some one.

Before I could reach the door myself, it was opened by Harriet, and she dashed into the room, looking flushed, excited, but not at all depressed or discomfited.

"Harriet!" I gasped out.

She looked at me with her head held very high.

"Oh, Cecilia, I am very glad you are in," she said.

"Why have you come?" I asked sharply.

"I've come to see you," she replied very tartly.

She turned her back upon me and walked to the door, which she had left open. And to my astonishment, I saw old Lady Langbourne, who had followed her up the stairs. Harriet led her into the room, and the old lady, whose face was very grave, held out her hand to me.

"My dear Lady Cecilia, you must forgive an old woman," she said, and in spite of my own opinion of the value of her advocacy, I could not help feeling that she was dignified and kind: "I feel that I have no right to come here at all to worry you, but Lady Usher is in such a friendless situation and begged so hard that I would accompany her here, that I consented. She had a fancy that you wouldn't see her if she came alone."

"I don't wish to see her," I said, speaking to Lady Langbourne only. "It is very, very painful for me to have to receive her at all."

"Ah!" said Lady Langbourne, seating herself slowly on the highest chair she could find.

And then she looked at us both and waited for the collision.

Harriet dealt the first blow. She turned to me, and, speaking in the same supercilious manner as at first, said:

"I hear, Cecilia, that you have been spreading the most infamous reports about me."

I knew where I was now, and I felt firm on my feet at once.

"I have spread no reports," I said.

"But we have proof of it," she insisted sharply. "You have told the most shocking stories about me."

"What stories?"

"You have said things which it is painful to repeat, things which no decent woman would have said about another."

I said nothing. I felt that I had need of all my self-command, and I didn't want to risk saying more than I could help. For I began to understand now exactly what it was that Harriet had said, and I knew how completely she must have tried to turn the tables upon me.

"You have told stories about me at Cowes and at your father's place."

I was startled.

"I have told no stories at all," said I. "I haven't even told the truth about you."

"What truth?"

"The truth that I promised to keep a secret, pro-

vided you swore never to do the same thing again, and provided you kept your oath."

Lady Langbourne leaned forward for the first time.

"What secret was that?" she asked, speaking to Harriet.

"I haven't the least idea," answered my cousin quickly. "I've never trusted Cecilia with a secret, nor should I ever be so rash as to do so."

She glared at me defiantly, but I did not speak. I shrugged my shoulders and turned away. Lady Langbourne, evidently curious, if not suspicious, turned to me.

"What secret did you mean, Lady Cecilia?" she asked.

But it was of no use to blurt out the ugly story before these two, and besides, I had made up my mind not to tell it to anybody until I had made a clean breast of it all to Gerald. I felt, in a blind sort of way, that, whatever he might have done, he was, after all, the person most to be trusted, that his were the best brains on which to rely.

"I would rather not say," I answered.

But Harriet was anxious to have everything cleared up at once, to have statements made before her, so that she could affect amazement and deny them.

"Pray speak out, Cecilia," she said contemptuously. "Let us hear this wonderful secret which you say I begged you to keep, I absolve you, my dear; I give you full permission to state what it was."

I turned to her, and looked her in the eye so steadily that she flinched, and I saw for the first time a slight look of anxiety appear on her face.

"There's no need to absolve me," I said quietly.

"I only swore to keep it as long as you had no more secrets of the same sort to be kept."

She grew red and then white. I think it was the calmness with which I spoke that frightened her. She had expected, hoped, that I should break down, and sob, and cry, and talk fast, and contradict myself, so that she might be able to take advantage of my confusion to make me look foolish in Lady Langbourne's eyes.

Since I was quiet, she had no choice but to be quiet too. And it is not so easy to cover up mistakes when one has to be quiet.

"Do pray leave off speaking in riddles. Tell Lady Langbourne, in so many words, of what it is that you accuse me."

"I don't accuse you at all," I said.

"Well, I'll use your own words then. What is it you swore you would not tell?"

I faced her quietly.

"Do you really wish me to tell that?" I said.

Lady Langbourne was watching us closely.

"Pray let us hear it, and end this cross-questioning," she said imperiously. "What is it, Lady Cecilia, that you swore not to tell?"

"She has never sworn anything. It's all an invention," said Harriet quickly. "I found her wandering about the house one night when we were staying with you at Cowes, Lady Langbourne, and when I wanted to know where she was going, she grew confused, and told me to say nothing about it. She threatened that, if I were to say anything, she would say it was not she but I, who was wandering about. There. That is the half of the story—the half that concerns Cowes, and what happened there."

She repeated this string of falsehoods deliberately,

in a hard, firm tone, keeping her eyes fixed upon me as she spoke.

She expected me to contradict her, and so did Lady Langbourne. But I knew it was of no use to discuss it with them, and I said nothing whatever.

After waiting a few moments for me to reply, Harriet turned impatiently to Lady Langbourne.

"You see, she can't deny it," she said.

But the old lady shook her head, and beckoned me towards her.

"Let us hear what the little Puritan has to say for herself," she said in a kind tone.

I went to her and let her take my hand and look at me with her shrewd old eyes.

"Is this the truth, my dear?" she asked very quietly.

"No," said I.

"Well, well, let us hear your version of what took place."

But I shook my head.

"I would rather not say anything about it now," I said steadily. "I swore I wouldn't say anything about it unless certain things should occur to release me from my oath."

"And you say they have occurred?"

"Yes, and I am free to speak."

"Then why don't you speak?"

"Because the first person to whom I am going to tell the whole affair is my husband."

"Well, he's a lawyer; that seems reasonable enough. He will give you good advice as to what you ought to do."

Lady Langbourne was looking at me with grave, kind eyes, but Harriet grew restless and eager, not liking the look of affairs.

"Mr. Calstock is away, so I understand," she began.

I did not turn to her, but I spoke very clearly, so that she heard distinctly what I said to Lady Langbourne:

"He has just come home."

"Very good. Where is he now?"

"He is in the study — with Sir John Usher."

This latter statement caused a great sensation.

"Sir John Usher!" cried Lady Langbourne, and she dropped my hand, and began, as I could see, to feel rather uncomfortable.

Harriet uttered a little shriek.

"Oh," she cried, "you see how it is, Lady Langbourne. This is a conspiracy against me, on the part of my husband, his solicitor, and his solicitor's wife. Now you'll believe what I told you, that I am hemmed in, helpless, without friends. Oh, you'll stand by me, won't you, won't you, to the end?"

She flung herself on her knees beside the old lady, and looked up into her face, clinging to her, and speaking in a tone that would have melted a stone.

"Yes, yes, I'll stand by you, of course, though I confess I don't quite understand what it's all about," said Lady Langbourne. "Have you been quite, quite frank with me, Harriet? I'm no harsh censor, as you know, and I have every sympathy with women who find the world go hardly with them. But I don't like to be hoodwinked, and I don't like people who are not frank."

"I have been frank, too frank. I've loved a man whom I ought not to have loved, and I've fought with my love and conquered it. And not even that will satisfy my husband, who wants to get rid of me, and who has no just cause against me. He has to

trump up a case against me, and to do it he has employed not only his lawyer, but his lawyer's wife. I'm surrounded by enemies: I find myself in a nest of them. I have nobody in the world to take my part but you, you, you."

Lady Langbourne was affected, but she was not well pleased. She rose slowly to her feet, and said:

"Well, Harriet, if all you say is true, it ought not to be hard to prove it, and I will help you as much as I can. I think, though, that we have put ourselves in a rather awkward position by coming here, while Sir John and Mr. Calstock are actually in the house. The matter is getting complicated, and I think I'd better go."

She walked towards the door, but Harriet still clung to her, begging her forgiveness for having dragged her into the affair, and again pleading the loneliness of her own situation.

It was the old lady who opened the door, and as soon as she got outside, we heard the opening of the study door downstairs, and the voices of Sir John and Gerald in the distance.

"It's Sir John! It's my husband," cried Harriet.

Lady Langbourne instinctively stood back, but Harriet pressed forward to the head of the stairs, and looked down. Then she turned dramatically.

"It's my chance, my last chance, perhaps," she said in her most pathetic tone. "I'll go down at once and face them. I'll force them to listen to me. I'll let them know the truth, the whole truth."

And she shot at me a look that seemed as if it would scorch me, and glided down the stairs, reaching the hall just as they came out into the light that came through the staircase window.

I watched the meeting, breathless, excited, and full of vague fears.

Harriet, who looked a sort of vision of beauty and grace as she glided downstairs, dressed in pale gray cloth with silky gray veilings and streamers forming a sort of cloud round her, got to the middle of the floor of the hall, and stood there, as Sir John and Gerald advanced from the darkness at the end of the hall.

They were talking as they came, but at the sight of her they both stopped short, and were silent.

Harriet held out her hands imploringly.

"John! Mr. Calstock! You'll hear me, won't you?" she said.

Her voice was so low and soft that we, standing on the landing above, could only just hear it, and she seemed as calm, as undisturbed as if her destiny had not hung on the result of the interview she was begging.

Harriet is never loud, or noisy, or violent, and perhaps that is why no man seems able to resist her. Sir John and Gerald would much rather not have had to give her the interview she wanted; that was easy to see; they turned towards each other at the same instant, but she came a little nearer and pleaded again.

They all spoke so low that now we could not even hear what Harriet said, but we saw that they were all three talking rapidly and earnestly. I watched, with my heart in my mouth, for I knew that it would be of bad augury if the two men were to yield to her wishes.

Harriet could wheedle a bird off a bough!

I could see that they both hesitated, and then that Sir John was going to yield.



He turned towards the back of the hall.

"Very well. Come along then," said he impatiently.

Gerald still hung back a little, and seemed to be unwilling to follow. But Harriet actually put her hand through his arm, and carried him off with her towards the study, by the door of which Sir John was by this time standing.

I drew back, bewildered and frightened. Old Lady Langbourne looked hard at me.

"She's scored off you already, my dear," she said dryly.

I said nothing. I was feeling quite sick with fear. Harriet was clever enough to have gained adherents in every direction, so it seemed to me. She had gained the support of Lady Langbourne; she had induced mamma to speak of her with unmistakable admiration; she had extorted a sort of grudging admiration from papa, for he had called her dangerous.

Now she had gained her heart's desire, for I knew that she had been trying in vain for weeks at least to obtain an interview with her husband.

And the presence of Gerald could not be anything but a source of strength to her; for even if Sir John were jealous of him, Harriet was quite clever enough, now that she had both of them together, to turn every incident and every word to her own advantage.

Lady Langbourne was looking at me steadily. Suddenly she laid her hand on my shoulder, drew me back into the drawing-room and shut the door.

"Poor child, I'm sorry for you," she said kindly. "For I'm sure you are bound to come off second best in a tussle with Harriet Usher. What on earth induced you to quarrel with her, my dear?"

I looked up fiercely.

"I haven't quarreled with her," I said. "On the contrary, I did all I could for her, because she was my own relation. And this is how she rewards me for what I've done. She is doing her best to estrange my own husband from me, even if she's not done it already. She is a wicked, wicked woman, and I'm very sorry for Sir John."

Lady Langbourne shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, a tradesman mustn't expect to have it all his own way when he marries into a good family," she said.

"I don't believe Harriet would have been faithful to any husband," I hazarded boldly.

Lady Langbourne shrugged her shoulders.

"Perhaps you're right," said she. "But at any rate she's been faithful for a very long time."

"To Sir John?"

"Oh, no, not to Sir John, of course," said she. "How could she be?"

"Then she shouldn't have married him," I said severely.

"Ah, you're severe, because you're young. But tell me, if Sir Lionel —"

I interrupted her hastily:

"I did my best," I said, "and I'm not hard upon others. But Harriet is ungrateful and treacherous."

The old lady nodded.

"I can forgive a great deal," she said gently, "to the victim of a great passion."

I stared at her.

"Do you mean that you can forgive any treachery, any ingratitude in a woman who is in love with a man who is not her husband?" I demanded.

"Oh, my dear child, how fond you are of talking

as if husbands and wives were the only people in the world! Marriage is a social necessity, but it is not necessarily a real union."

"No. I see that in some cases, Harriet's, for instance, it's nothing but a safe beginning," I said.

"Very good, and there's some truth in it. But don't be epigrammatic, child, or you will never be happy. With that pretty childlike little face of yours you shouldn't cultivate a sharp tongue. You can get on without it."

She held out her hand to me, and said good-by, and in a few minutes she was in her landau, and I was left alone.

I felt stunned.

One painful interview had followed so fast on the heels of the other: Harriet's scornful denials had come so quickly on the top of Sir John's questions; and Lady Langbourne's cynical speeches had been uttered so soon after Gerald's cold greeting, that I was bewildered, confused, and sick with all sorts of fears.

I no longer knew how I stood with any one. Even my own husband, though he had been angry with Sir John for persecuting me with questions, had met me without any greeting, and had seemed to be more occupied with Harriet's affairs and those of Sir John, than with me.

What did it all mean?

Something was going on of which I knew nothing, something in which they all — Harriet, her husband, and Gerald, were concerned, but in which I had no part, and which they were all apparently determined to keep from me.

What was going on downstairs, in the study where they had all three shut themselves in?

Was Harriet justifying herself to them all, at my

expense? Was she telling the same story downstairs that she had already told to Lady Langbourne? And would Sir John and Gerald believe her if she did?

It was, surely, impossible that Gerald should take her word against mine! If I really had reason to be jealous of her, it was inconceivable that he should not know that I was absolutely blameless.

But had I really reason to be jealous? I could not tell. Gerald's behavior has been so strange lately; he has kept his own secrets so closely, shut me out so entirely from his confidence, that I feel altogether at sea where he is concerned.

His greeting hurt me dreadfully, or rather his failure to greet me. What did it mean?

Did he suspect me? Was Harriet clever enough to deceive him as well as her own husband?

I felt paralyzed by my misery when I remembered that, at the very moment when I was tormented by these fears and doubts, Harriet herself was shut up with my husband and her own, and was perhaps telling them the story that she had so unblushingly told Lady Langbourne.

It was of no use to tell myself that Gerald would know me better than to believe her. I should have thought so myself a few days ago. But the estrangement which has taken place between Gerald and me has grown so fast that now I really don't know what his thoughts are on any subject connected with either Harriet or me.

Why did he go away? Why wouldn't he let me know where he was? And why was Harriet so confident of her own position that she was able to risk everything by inviting Lord Hugh to visit her at night at Fouroaks?

I walked up and down the drawing-room, wonder-

ing what was going to happen, and whether I dared go down and ask admittance into the study.

It seemed to me so dreadful to think that I had to remain helpless and tongue-tied while this wicked woman was certainly doing her best to reinstate herself by poisoning the minds of Sir John and Gerald against me!

Half a dozen times I stole out of the room and went as far as the head of the staircase, only to come back again, too shy and too despondent to take the bold step of going downstairs and confronting them all together, as I felt that it would be best for me to do.

I seemed to have been hours by myself when I heard the study door open, and sprang to the balustrade to look over into the hall.

I could see nothing in the darkness at the farther end, where the study door was, but I heard Gerald's voice speaking, and then Jackson's, answering distinctly:

"Yes, sir."

Then the door closed and I heard Jackson coming away, and I ran back into the drawing-room, with my heart beating very fast, wondering what was going to happen next.

I heard Jackson's step on the stairs, and I guessed that he was bringing a message to me.

A few moments later he came in, and said:

"Mr. Calstock has sent me, my lady, to ask if you will be good enough to come to the study for a few minutes."

"Very well, Jackson. Is he alone?"

"No, my lady. Sir John and Lady Usher are with him."

"Thank you."

Jackson held the door open for me, so I had to go down at once, though I would rather have had a few minutes to myself first, to think out what I had better do.

I was disturbed at the manner in which I was summoned. Why did not Gerald come and fetch me himself, instead of sending a servant with a message? It seemed to me that I could trace the baleful influence of Harriet in this action, and it made me nervous and sick at heart.

Surely Gerald must know how trying a thing it was for me to have to appear suddenly before the three of them, to be questioned, as if I were a witness in a criminal trial, or worse still, the criminal herself!

For I felt by no means sure what complexion Harriet might have put upon my own acts, while both she and her husband were so evidently hostile to me that I had only Gerald to look to for support.

Would he take my part?

After all, as I recognized now with stupefaction, it was only a case of my word against hers.

And Harriet's diabolical cleverness, which was becoming more and more manifest to me, was pitted against my own ignorance and carelessness, which now began to look to me like folly.

Why had I gone down to Fouroaks by myself? Surely, surely — and I trembled as this thought came into my mind — it could not be that Gerald had permitted me to go away in order to try me? As the hideous suspicion suggested itself to me that Harriet might have poisoned his mind against me, and then helped to set a trap for me, I grew so miserable, so frightened, that I had to cling to the banisters for support as I went downstairs; and by the time I reached

the study and went in, I know that I must have looked exactly like a guilty prisoner as he enters the dock.

For a moment or two after I had gone into the study I could scarcely see. Dusk was coming, but the electric light had not yet been turned on.

It seemed to me that the room was full of dusky figures, which looked awful in the gloom. There was a mist before my eyes, my limbs were trembling, and I walked unsteadily.

There was a dead silence in the room as I came in. Then out of the dusk Gerald's figure loomed suddenly, close to me, and he put his hand on my arm, and said, quite gently:

"I'm afraid this will be trying for you, Cecilia. But Lady Usher wished to see you, in the presence of Sir John, and I thought it would be best for you to know what she has to say, so that you could either support or contradict—"

Suddenly Harriet's voice rang out, not loud, but clear and ringing, and at the first sound of it I came wholly to myself, recognizing the fact that we two were to be pitted against each other, and that I must pull myself together and make the best fight I could.

I did not know whether I stood alone, or whether I had an adherent even in my own husband.

For although the pressure of his hand on my arm was kindly, and his tone gentle, there was something judicial in his manner which forced me to recognize that he was speaking to me, not as a husband, not as an advocate, but as a man who tries to be a judge, and an impartial one.

It was too cold to warm, to reassure me, though the fact that he spoke so carefully, so deliberately, was somehow comforting too. I knew that I was go-

ing to tell the truth: surely, surely I might trust him, apart from his being my husband, to be keen-witted enough to know the truth when he heard it!

"Don't prompt her, Mr. Calstock!" cried Harriet.

Gerald kept his hand on my arm, but he turned to her, and said:

"I am not prompting her, Lady Usher. But if you frighten her too much, she won't be able to answer you at all, or to state her case, which may not, you know, be the same as your own."

Harriet uttered a little exclamation which sounded contemptuous, but she said nothing more. And then I, getting used to the gloom and also to my own position, was able to distinguish the figure of Sir John Usher, standing in the window, with his back to us all.

Gerald led me to a chair. All the rest were standing. Harriet was leaning upon the back of a large arm-chair on one side of the hearthrug; I now found myself seated exactly opposite to her, in another arm-chair.

Gerald took his place on the hearthrug between us, with his back to the fire.

"I think perhaps, Lady Usher," he said in his low, clear tones, "it will be best if you will give your own account, once more, of the way in which a misunderstanding has arisen between you and Lady Cecilia."

Harriet bowed her head in assent, and began quite calmly:

"It began at Cowes. Lady Langbourne is a most charming hostess, and she gets the liveliest people she can about her; but the society one meets at her house is sometimes what is called 'fast.' Knowing this, and knowing that my cousin Cecilia had been flirting with two men who belong to a rather fast set, I thought it



my duty, as a relation with much more experience of the world, to keep a sort of watch over her, without alarming her by telling her I was doing so."

I was so much astounded by this speech that I could not have uttered a word of contradiction, even if I had wished to do so.

Of course, I knew who the two men were to whom she referred, for she must certainly mean Sir Arnold Banbury and Lord Hugh Hawkhurst. And, unluckily, the adventure with the yacht which I knew must be her trump card, was well known to her.

She waited when she had said this, but nobody spoke. I was not going to contradict anything until I knew exactly how much I had to disprove, if I could.

I could hear Sir John moving restlessly behind me, but Gerald stood with his hands behind him, his feet planted firmly, and his head bent, perfectly still.

Suddenly Harriet spoke again, very quickly:

"Can we have a light, please? We can't see each other's face."

I looked up. In the gloom her own face looked just a patch of white against a dark background; but I could see those luminous, shining eyes of hers staring maliciously at me.

Gerald turned and switched on the electric light, which filled every corner of the room, and produced a strange, startling effect. For nobody had expected the change from darkness to light to come so quickly, and as I glanced quickly round me, I seemed to catch, in that first moment, a glimpse into the mind of each person present, as well as a look at the faces.

Harriet looked beautiful, excited, wicked; Gerald looked anxious in spite of the studied calm which he knows how to affect; while on the bluff, handsome features of poor Sir John, I saw such an ex-

pression of distress and discomfort as made me suddenly very sorry for him.

And then I became aware that all the other persons in the room were looking intently at me.

Harriet went on:

"Of course, I knew that there was no harm in my cousin, but still she was indiscreet." I looked up quickly, scarcely able to refrain from interrupting her; for whose indiscretion was it that had introduced me to Lord Hugh and his friend? But I kept myself under strong self-control, and let her go on: "So, as I say, I watched. And one night, when all the household were supposed to be in bed, I met her coming upstairs in her dressing-gown, with a wrap round her head, and I asked her where she had been, and she said she had just come in from the garden. She seemed annoyed at my meeting her, and when I pressed her to say whom she had been with, she snubbed me. So I warned her that though there was no actual harm in taking a midnight walk it was an unwise thing to do, and likely to set people talking. Then she grew angry, and told me there was much more harm in my walks than in hers, or something to that effect. I forget the exact words she used."

Here Harriet paused. Her voice was always low, but clear and distinct. She spoke deliberately, and with such an air of sincerity that sometimes I began to wonder, as I listened to her, whether all this fiction which she was serving out to us were not really fact, and whether I had not really done and said the things she attributed to me, and then forgotten all about them.

There was, too, something so apparently frank and fair in the way she paused from time to time, as if to give me the opportunity to deny her statements, if I

would, that I began to feel cold all over at the thought of the effect her words must have upon other people, when it was so strong upon myself.

But I would not speak, though she seemed to bend forward, as if to receive my reply to all this fiction.

Presently she coughed gently, and went on again:

"You all know, so it's of no use for me to affect not to know myself, that I've sometimes been indiscreet myself —"

She waited a little, thinking, I suppose, to entrap me into an interruption of some kind; but I said not a word.

Then her voice grew pathetic: I never knew any one so well able to manage her voice as Harriet is!

She went on in tones that would have melted a stone:

"And you know, too, how bitterly I've been made to suffer for it. You know how I've been practically banished from my children and my home, how I've been forced to wander about from one friend's house to another, dependent upon my relations for kindness and sympathy, and utterly helpless to get myself out of the terrible straits in which I've been plunged, through nothing worse than carelessness, the carelessness that comes of over-indulgence."

Harriet had now got her chance, and she was taking the fullest advantage of it. Sir John had left the window and come forward into the room. I could see him from where I sat, leaning against Gerald's big writing-table, his face flushed, his hands trembling, pulling nervously at his beard.

How could she ever have described him as heartless and soulless! It almost seemed to me, during this interview, that he was wearing his heart upon his sleeve.

Harriet, finding herself uncontradicted and uninterrupted, went on in the full flow of her eloquence:

"How could I let my cousin, a woman much younger than I, get herself into the same sort of difficulties that I had fallen into myself? I myself am innocent of any wrong."

When she said this, it was curious to see how we all, with one accord, raised our heads to look at her, and how meekly and yet firmly she met this fire of eyes. She clasped her hands loosely over the chair-back, and went on:

"And I took it for granted that Cecilia was too."

This was almost more than I could endure. That she should compare herself with me, her flirtations with mine, was too much. But just as I was opening my mouth to speak, I happened to catch Gerald's eyes looking at me steadily, and upon the instant I decided to remain silent, even though I did not quite know what his look at me might mean.

So on went Harriet again with her story:

"But innocence is not enough to protect a woman, as I have found out to my cost."

She paused again, and I could hear Sir John whistling to himself softly, and I knew that he too found it hard to keep silent, so much had he to say. But he was prudent too.

"So I urged her to be frank with me, and told her the sort of things that get whispered about pretty women who are not discreet. But she would not listen; she would only gibe at me, and then she grew angry, and said that, if I were to tell stories about her, she would tell some about me. And she asked me which of the two was the more likely to be believed. I couldn't wrangle with her, and I was

growing angry myself. So I left her, and she went back to her own room, I suppose."

The last two words Harriet let slip out so very softly, but with so much cunning suggestiveness, that I could see the veins suddenly start out on the forehead of Gerald, and his hands clench.

There was quite a long silence, and then Sir John spoke, in a hoarse voice, and very gruffly:

"Lady Cecilia, what have you to say?"

I looked up quickly, and my voice sounded, oh, so loud and harsh after Harriet's smooth tones:

"I have nothing to say, Sir John."

He came forward, staring at me intently, as if he would read my very soul.

"Do you mean," he said, quite tremulously, "that she's telling the truth?"

"No," said I shortly.

He looked at me again, and I saw the look of excitement, of hope, die away from his face. Then he turned away quickly, and walked back to the desk again. Harriet, who had stood quite calmly behind her chair, went on again as if nothing had interrupted her:

"Next day Cecilia went away. I had a talk with her first, but she wouldn't listen to me."

At this barefaced mis-statement I, remembering how very different that interview had been from what she now implied, looked up at her suddenly, and laughed.

Her face, which had been quite colorless, grew pink as our eyes met, but she hurried on:

"The next thing I heard about her was that she had got herself talked about at Dieppe by being out all night with Sir Arnold Banbury on board his yacht."

That was more than I could bear. This artful mingling of the truth with the fiction which she had so carefully prepared, and for which I too ought to have been prepared, threw me off my guard.

"My mother was with me," I cried. "And you know it. It's absurd to pretend you don't know all about that. Everybody does."

Gerald took a step forward on the rug, as if to come between us, or to prevent my rash and headlong outburst. But he did not say anything, and, indeed, there was scarcely time, for Harriet broke into a peal of well-modulated and quite musical laughter.

"Ah! You don't like to be reminded of your own indiscretions, of course, though you could reproach me most cruelly for mine, which were no worse, after all."

"I was not indiscreet. Mamma —"

Harriet waved her right hand lightly, with a little fluttering gesture, which reminded me of mamma herself.

"Oh, don't you think you might leave that for your husband and Sir John to judge? If you liked Sir Arnold —"

"I didn't like him, I don't like him."

Harriet cut me short:

"If that's true, there's no excuse for you," she said. "I admit I've flirted, and I admit I've cared for the man I flirted with. I confess it frankly. I know it wasn't right; I'm sorry I ever did it. But it's true. If you, as you say, never cared for Sir Arnold, why did you do such very risky things for him?"

"I haven't done risky things," I cried passionately.

Gerald held up a warning hand, and Harriet was annoyed at this interference, slight as it was.

"Pray, Mr. Calstock," she said rather sharply, "let your wife say what she has to say. It is only fair that she should be heard too in her own defense."

"Defense!" I echoed, aghast.

But the next moment I realized that it was true: this was not, as it ought to have been, a question of Harriet's indiscretion only: it had come to be a question of mine too. And all through her!

Harriet echoed my word in a derisive tone:

"Defense, yes. You are more to blame than I was, because you had some one to warn you, to look after you, and I had no one."

Sir John broke in quickly:

"You had plenty of warnings."

She turned to him, with a sudden and most skillful change to a humble, pleading tone:

"Well, I've been punished, haven't I, for not heeding them?"

Sir John did not answer.

Gerald now spoke:

"Supposing, Lady Usher," he said, "we now take up the thread of your narrative?"

"Oh, yes."

"You saw your cousin again at Folkestone, and you were good friends with her there?"

Harriet replied quite meekly:

"Why, you know I was. You were there yourself, and you and your wife were both most kind to me. I was beginning to hope that you would intercede for me with Sir John, and that you would persuade him to forgive me if I have been a little indiscreet, that you would tell him how anxious I was to get back home to my darlings — and to him."

She suddenly bent her head, and either was, or pretended to be, too much overcome to go on. Sir

John began to speak, checked himself, looked at Gerald, and not catching his eye, turned away again.

Gerald's calm voice brought her back to the point.

"Yes. You asked me to intercede for you. You promised to tell me everything."

"And I did tell you everything, everything. I did not disguise my own weakness, and I let you know how deeply I was distressed and wounded by Sir John's refusal to believe me."

"I have only refused to believe what no sane person could believe," cried Sir John, who, it was easy to see, found it very hard to preserve an appearance of calmness where he was deeply moved.

Gerald interrupted again.

"And now to your visit to Fouroaks."

Harriet raised her head again, and seemed conscious that she had got to the crisis of her story.

"I went to stay a day with her, hoping as much from her as I did from you," she said. "But I found her very unwilling to let me stay with her, though she would not say why."

Once more I wanted to dash in with my own version of the story, but again a glance from Gerald stopped me.

Harriet went on:

"I only spent one night at Fouroaks, and during that night — something happened."

There was a dead silence. By this time, of course, I knew that she was going to repeat the story she had told Lady Langbourne, and I was quite ready when she said:

"I went downstairs, because I heard some one getting into the house. I found that it was no burglar, but some one who had been let in — and out again — by my cousin Cecilia."



I kept silent.

After a pause Harriet ended her story:

"Next morning I told her I could not stay any longer, after what I had seen. I had no wish to betray her, but in the position I am in, exiled by my own husband, I have to be so very careful that I dare not expose myself to scandal. There, that's all. Let her deny what I have said, if she likes. I've no doubt you will believe her rather than me, Sir John, because you hate me, and you want to get rid of me. And so, though you know in your own heart that I'm telling the truth, and though my cousin can't disprove what I say, I've no doubt you will make a pretense of believing that it is she, and not I, who is to be believed."

"I wish to God I could believe you!" cried Sir John.

And even though I knew that to prove Harriet to be speaking the truth would be ruin to me, my heart went out to him. For he spoke with so much earnestness, with so much passion, that I knew he must have loved her very deeply.

Harriet knew how to strike while the iron was hot. Leaning across the chair-back and clasping her hands, she cried, in those deep, penetrating, soft tones of hers that move one in spite of oneself:

"Why don't you, why don't you then? Why not forgive and forget? I've done you no wrong, I've only flirted idly, and I'm sorry for it. I've been the victim of scandal, that's all. Oh, John, you were always generous and good. Won't you let me go back home?"

I could see his face working with intense excitement, and I knew that a most pitiful struggle was going on within him between his sense of right and the love he still must feel for her.

It was very strange that, although so much of my own happiness was involved in this struggle which was taking place between them, I for the moment almost lost sight of my own wrongs and grievances against her, so deeply was I stirred by the crisis which had come in the lives of these two. I was sorry for him, beating his heart out against the rock of the selfish and vicious nature of this woman whom he had loved and trusted, and who was ready to sacrifice everything and everybody to the indulgence of her own vicious instincts and selfish interests!

I don't know how it would have ended but for Gerald. He took a step forward and looked at Sir John, who suddenly turned away and went back to the writing-table again.

"I think it is only fair to you, Lady Usher," he said—and his voice sounded hard and grating after the passionate tones in which the husband and wife had been speaking—"that you should know there are persons ready to come forward and swear to certain acts of yours which—well, which do not tally with the story you have just told us."

Harriet turned upon him quickly. She had suddenly grown very pale.

"Indeed!" she said sarcastically. "Am I to understand then, that you have been helping Sir John to make out a case against me?"

He took her fiery sarcasm quietly.

"I have certainly been helping Sir John to find out whether there is a case against you," he said calmly.

She was silent a moment, and then at last she came out from behind the arm-chair. It was the first sign of anything like weakness, in her case or in her demeanor, that she had given.

"Pray, who are these precious witnesses?" she asked contemptuously.

There was no answer for a moment, and then she asked rather anxiously:

"Have you, Mr. Calstock, been employing paid detectives to spy upon me, and to scrape together a flimsy case out of nothing to enable my husband to get rid of me?"

"Of course not," cried Sir John. "As if I would allow such a thing!"

Gerald answered quietly:

"We have employed no detectives, Lady Usher."

Her tone was sharper as she asked:

"Who then are these witnesses? Are you ashamed of them, that you don't dare to tell me their names?"

"One of them is a servant of Lady Langbourne's."

"A servant!"

Harriet uttered the word in the most scornful tone, and laughed.

"And is it possible you can take such evidence as that? Why, there isn't a barrister living who wouldn't be ashamed to call such evidence! Servants, indeed! Call them, call them! Bring all the lying maids and valets in England to swear away my reputation! No one would believe them, and their evidence can only bring discredit upon you!"

She was much excited, and she spoke with so much vehemence that Sir John watched her with a sort of sick hopefulness painful to see.

His appearance was from first to last a revelation to me. I saw now how wrong I had been to believe Harriet, and that she was wholly to be mistrusted. She always represented her husband as a man absorbed in his business and his hobbies, cold and indifferent as far as his wife was concerned. Now

I was learning the truth, and it needed no words to tell me that he had loved his wife very dearly, that his conduct in practically banishing her from his house was not the result of indifference, but of passionate resentment.

It was clear that the vehemence with which she held her own was having its effect upon Sir John, and now that she poured scorn upon the notion that witnesses against her could be brought forward to prove her guilt, I could see him wavering, and watching her as if anxious that she might prove to be innocent after all.

There was a long pause when she had finished her contemptuous outburst, and Sir John stood watching her with eager eyes, evidently admiring her, and wishing to be persuaded that she was speaking the truth.

In spite of myself I was fascinated by her, and I watched her in a sort of stupor, wondering whether she would really succeed in persuading her own husband, if not mine also, that she was a deeply injured person, suffering for my faults.

I was in a sort of maze, not now feeling anything very acutely, too bewildered to reason, after the amazing statements I had just been listening to, and the effect they had had upon the hearers.

It was so evident that she was straining every nerve to win her husband back to her; and it was evident too that she was already, in a measure, succeeding.

But what was Gerald thinking?

It was impossible to tell. His professional manner has grown to be such a secure armor, he wears it so naturally and easily, and it hides his real feelings so completely, that even I, knowing him as I do, and used to every look and gesture, found it useless to

try to detect any impression which Harriet's passionate protests might be making upon him.

I could see that he acted as a restraining influence upon Sir John; that he checked him by a warning look or a step forward when his client would have yielded to his wife's seductions. But that was all.

It was due to Gerald's influence that Sir John did not answer Harriet's last outburst. Gerald stepped forward, and remained between husband and wife, as if considering her words, for some moments, during which, as I suppose he had foreseen, the effect of her outburst died down a little.

I saw a look of resentment flash out of her hazel eyes at him when at last he spoke:

"Servants' evidence, Lady Usher, has to be taken sometimes," he said. "Of course, there are plenty of servants whose evidence is not to be trusted. But it is maligning a very valuable class of the community to suggest that they never tell the truth. As a matter of fact, very few divorce suits could be carried through successfully without the evidence of those people who know most about our domestic lives; and a judge can see as well as most people when he is dealing with evidence which is honestly given, and when he is not."

Harriet, who never wastes emotion, was by this time quite calm again, outwardly, at any rate.

"Then I have nothing to fear," she said quietly. "As any servant who says anything to my discredit is unworthy of belief, no doubt the judge will know how to deal with such evidence."

"No doubt."

There was another silence, and I saw that, calm as she seemed to be, she was really less at ease than she

looked. One of her hands was fumbling nervously with the trinkets she wears dangling on a long chain.

She presently turned, with an abrupt movement, to Gerald.

"Who is it that you have bribed to speak against me?" she asked.

He did not answer. Sir John stepped forward quickly, and said in a voice full of suppressed passion:

"You mustn't insinuate any such thing as bribery, Harriet. You know better than to think either Calstock or myself capable of such methods."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I know that there is no one in the world able to give true evidence against me," she said firmly.

"So your witnesses must be bribed by somebody."

"It is false."

"It is true."

Gerald intervened.

"If Lady Usher feels confident that nothing can be proved, there is no more to be said — at present," said he.

Harriet looked at him out of the corners of her eyes.

"Who is this witness of yours?" she asked contemptuously.

"Lady Langbourne's own maid is one, and — there are two others."

Harriet began to look uncomfortable, but she carried it off with a laugh.

"Very well," she said. "Then all I have to demand is that I may be confronted with these three people, and allowed to ask them a few questions — not by themselves, but in your presence, Mr. Calstock, and in the presence of my husband. Not one of

them will dare to persist in these falsehoods when they have to meet me to my face."

Sir John was again walking up and down, looking anxious and undecided.

"What do you think, Calstock?" I heard him mutter to Gerald, in a very low voice.

Harriet was watching Sir John intently, though without appearing to do so. She had drawn down her veil, as if preparing to go, but I could see her glittering eyes turning to follow him as he walked restlessly up and down, carefully avoiding that meeting of the eyes which she on her side was most anxious to bring about.

I, on my side, absorbed in this drama between husband and wife, was watching it as if I myself had not been involved. Indeed, I think, at that time, I scarcely realized how dangerous and difficult my own position was, and how much my own future depended upon the result of this interview between Sir John and Harriet.

All I felt was that she was exerting herself to the very utmost to make the best possible use of this opportunity that she had gained so unexpectedly, of exerting her personal fascination upon the incensed husband who had successfully kept her away from him for so long.

I could see how much she hoped and feared: just as I could see what Sir John was feeling. But Gerald remained the one inscrutable figure.

"I think," he said, not answering Sir John in the same tone, but speaking aloud, "that Lady Usher is quite justified in asking to be confronted with these witnesses." He turned to Harriet. "Will you make an appointment, Lady Usher, to meet them at my office?"

She hesitated a moment and then said:

"I should like to meet them now, and to get it over." She turned triumphantly to Sir John: "Then you will see how absurd your suspicions of me have been, and the sort of evidence they were founded on."

I noticed that I seemed to have dropped out of the matter altogether, just as, taking advantage of the first opportunity, I had dropped out of the scene that was taking place.

I had gradually withdrawn to the window, where I sat between the curtains, very still, and thankful that they all seemed to have forgotten me.

"I'm afraid I can't summon them all without some sort of notice," said Gerald.

Harriet laughed scornfully.

"No. I should imagine it must be necessary to have time to coach them all up in their parts," she said.

Gerald took no notice of the sneer.

Sir John, however, was not so patient.

"You have no right to bring such accusations," he said.

Harriet turned upon him quickly.

"You have brought accusations against me," she said.

They were standing close together, and I saw the look of eager wistfulness in Sir John's eyes. Harriet put out her hand and, timidly but caressingly, laid it on his sleeve.

"Won't you hear me? Won't you listen to me?" she said.

The tension was growing acute. Gradually, by Harriet's contrivance, no doubt, the two had come together, in spite of Gerald's careful efforts to keep them apart. There they stood side by side, Sir John



apparently scarcely conscious of anything but the near presence of the wife who was so unworthy of him, but who evidently still had the power to move him strongly.

Knowing as I do the wickedness of which Harriet is capable, the recklessness with which she abandoned herself to her own passions, the callousness with which she has thrown the blame of her own guilt upon me, I found myself hoping with all my heart, not only for my own sake, but for his, that Sir John would not yield to the impulse I saw in his eyes, and take her back again.

For now I knew her too well not to be sure that she would treat him in the same way again.

Sir John was struggling with himself. Harriet was looking tender, imploring, womanly, most seductive.

I held my breath as I waited for the result of an appeal which seemed irresistible.

Then, only just in time, as I was sure, Gerald stepped in.

Speaking in a sharp, clear, decided voice which seemed to drop upon their emotional state like cold water upon red-hot steel, he said:

"I must remind you, Lady Usher, that Sir John has listened to you—more than once. He has now to listen to other people. You may rely upon his giving them a fair hearing, as he has given you."

She stepped back quickly, and so did Sir John.

I heard a sort of hiss from her lips, and I saw Sir John shiver.

Gerald did not give either of them time to speak, for he crossed the room rapidly, and touched the button of the bell.

"I quite understand your feelings, Lady Usher, and that you are anxious to have this suspense ended.

Would you like to go with me to see one of these witnesses at once?"

Harriet and Sir John both turned and looked at him in surprise at the suggestion, while I wondered what he had in his mind.

Harriet demurred at first, but suddenly changing her mind, agreed to go with him.

When Jackson came to answer the bell, Gerald told him to call a taxi, and then turned to Harriet.

But she drew back as he opened the door, and said quietly:

"I've changed my mind, Mr. Calstock, and I won't go with you to see any of these people. They must be confronted with me openly, in the presence of Sir John, and you must make an appointment for that purpose. Why not send for them to your office to-morrow?"

"Very well," said he.

She turned to Sir John, and said:

"You will soon know how unjust you have been to me!"

He started, and turned to look at her, as she held out her hand imploringly. He tried to answer, but could not.

"Come, Lady Usher," said Gerald. "The cab is here. Will you have it?"

She frowned at him, drawing herself up.

"Yes," she said. "I will have it." She turned once more to Sir John, but warned, I think, by a glance from Gerald, he had gone back to the other end of the room. "Good-by," she said, in the most caressing, pleading voice imaginable.

But Sir John would not turn. He would not even answer. Harriet turned away with an impatient movement, while Gerald waited for her at the door,

Then, after one more moment's hesitation, she glanced up at his face, and, with a shrug of the shoulders, went out with him into the hall, paying no attention to his remarks about the weather as he escorted her to her cab.

I think Sir John did not notice that I was in the room. When once this woman whom he had passionately loved had gone out, he could see no one.

Suddenly he threw himself into a chair beside the desk, and buried his head in his hands.

I got up from the chair where I was hiding, and came into the middle of the room. I think for a moment I forgot the light in which he regarded me, and that I was anxious only to comfort him if I could. I was so sorry for him that my heart ached. But before I could think of anything to say he heard me move, I suppose, for he looked up quite suddenly, and then his face changed and he scowled at me as if I had been an evil thing.

The shock to me was dreadful. I uttered a little cry, and went quickly out of the room, only just in time to save myself from bursting into tears.

The front door was still open, and I could see the taxicab outside. Harriet was already seated in it, and Gerald was standing with one foot on the step. They were talking eagerly and earnestly, and again the jealous fears that I had had about them came back to me in their fullest force. I could see that she was pleading with him, speaking, as I felt sure, though I could not hear them — in her most caressing, gentle voice, that voice that makes fools of everybody.

For a moment I stood in consternation. I almost felt that I must run out and put an end to the conversation which was dealing stabs at my heart.

But of course I dared not.

I went upstairs, very slowly, hoping to see Gerald return, so that I might be able to exchange just half a dozen words with him before he could get back to the study where his client was still waiting.

But linger as I might, it was of no use. I had to go back to the drawing-room; and even when I got to the window and looked out, it seemed quite a long time before he shut the door and told the driver to go on.

Then I flew from the window to intercept him on his way to the study: but again I was too late; and I had to content myself with going over in my mind what I would say to him as soon as Sir John had gone away.

Now that the excitement of that dreadful scene in the study was over and I had time to think about it all, the sort of stupor in which I had sat and listened gave place to a feeling of intense uneasiness.

I was mad with impatience to see Gerald by himself, and to learn what his real thoughts and feelings were.

I could not for a moment think that he would believe the awful things that Harriet had said of me. It seemed too preposterous that he, who had loved me and known me so well, should credit such horrible falsehoods uttered by a woman whom he knew to be guilty, reckless, and unprincipled.

But yet I could not feel comfortable, remembering how quietly he had let her speak, and then how confidentially he had appeared to converse with her as soon as they got out of the study.

Had she succeeded in estranging me from my husband completely? He had certainly allowed her to say the most infamous things about me without the least attempt to check or to contradict her.

At the time I had been willing to think that this was part of his policy, and that he meant to let her go on confidently until she ended by betraying herself. But nothing of the sort had happened, and the last glimpse I had of them showed them to be apparently on the best of terms.

It was about ten minutes later when I heard sounds of voices and footsteps, and the opening and shutting of doors downstairs, and I waited eagerly for the moment when, his client disposed of, I should be able to have that long talk with Gerald which was to make all clear, or at least to let me know how I stood, and whether Harriet had really alienated his affections from me.

I heard the front door open and shut, but I did not hear Gerald's footsteps in the hall, or coming up the stairs.

With a sinking heart I waited, and waited, until at last I went downstairs, unable to restrain my impatience any longer. Jackson was coming out of the study with a note which he put on a salver and brought to me. It was addressed to me in Gerald's handwriting, and I opened it with a fearful foreboding.

The letter was very short.

"My dearest Cecilia,

"I shall be away to-night, on business, but will try to be back in time for dinner to-morrow evening.

"Your affectionate husband,

"G."

It was one of the most cruel blows I have ever received. In the dreadful days of my marriage to Sir Lionel Eberhard nothing ever stung me as much as these things do now. For then I didn't care so much as I do now.

As I looked at the letter I felt as if I had been struck dead; there is no other word which can describe the intense horror and the sort of numbness which seized me, and kept me rooted to the floor.

But that feeling soon passed away, and for the first time since I married Gerald I felt as if I hated him.

How can he have the heart to treat me like this, when I love him so, and when he pretends that he loves me? It is worse, ever so much worse, than being treated badly by a man for whom one doesn't care!

If he must go away "on business" why not, at least, let me know something about it? I would keep his secrets, he knows me well enough to be sure of that. But to leave me like this, when he must know that, after the awful scene I went through to-day, I am mad with anxiety to talk to him about it! It is too cruel, too maddening!

When husbands treat their wives like this, is it surprising when they find them flirting with other men? This letter seems to have turned every tender feeling I had for him into something bitter and hard. I don't think I can ever feel towards him again as I used to feel.

To leave me after the things I had to hear Harriet say! When he had time, too, to spare to chat with her at the cab door! With her, the woman who had just been defaming me so shamefully!

I did not cry: I did not ask any questions of Jackson, who was waiting to know whether I had any orders to give him. I just read the letter, folded it carefully and put it in my pocket and then told the man that neither Mr. Calstock nor I would dine at home to-night.

And then I went upstairs and rang for Lindsay, and dressed for dinner.

I dressed ever so carefully too, choosing my gown and my ornaments, and putting on my prettiest rings. Lindsay was watching me curiously in the mirror as she did my hair, and then I noticed, for the first time, how altered I looked. My lips were pinched tightly together, and there was a bright red spot, as if I had been painted, in the middle of each of my cheeks. My eyes, too, were bright and burning, and altogether I looked absolutely unlike the little Cis I knew.

Indeed little Cis is beginning to undergo a transformation, and to find out why it is that the married women she knows are not the contented, happy creatures she had always imagined that they ought to be.

If, when one marries the man of one's heart, one is rewarded by being subjected to all that I have suffered during the past few weeks, one can't help thinking there is something, after all, in the creed of people like Lady Langbourne, the people one had thought oneself able to despise!

Presently Lindsay asked me if I was going to dine with Lady Rushbury. I said "No," and then she went on brushing my hair without speaking, but I saw in the glass that there was quite a frightened look on her face.

When I was ready I called for my pale blue cloak with the ermine lining, and then I noticed that Lindsay fumbled about instead of bringing it.

"Make haste. Why are you so long?" I said sharply.

She opened the wardrobe and brought the cloak and helped me on with it, and then I saw that she was crying.

"What's the matter, Lindsay?" I said.

"Nothing, my lady."

"There is something. You are crying. Have you got toothache again?"

Lindsay wiped her eyes.

"No, my lady. If I must tell you, I can't bear to see you look so."

"Look how?" I asked, trying not to show that I was touched, as I couldn't help being, by the tone of her voice.

"My lady, I wish you would stay at home to-night, and let me wire to Lady Rushbury to come and spend the evening with you," she said suddenly.

"Why?" I asked sharply.

She hesitated a minute, and then said:

"Because I don't think you're well, my lady, and because I think, if you go out to-night, you may very likely — catch cold."

Something in the tone of her voice struck me with an odd sort of chill. She seemed afraid of something, but anxious not to let me guess what it was that caused her fear. I laughed at her suggestion, and told her to call a taxi for me.

"Won't you have the car, my lady?" said she.

But I didn't want the car, and I repeated my order, and she went slowly downstairs. When I looked at myself again in the cheval glass I began to understand what made her so nervous. There was a look in my eyes which I myself had never seen in them before. I seemed to myself to look mad.

Lindsay came downstairs with me, and insisted upon seeing me into the taxi herself, and in taking the direction to the driver.

I named that one of papa's clubs where I knew I was most likely to find him, and Lindsay repeated it.



Then she gave me a long, kind, *motherly* look and stood back while I drove away.

Lindsay is a woman herself, and she is clever enough to know when there is something wrong, and good enough to be sorry!

And that look of hers into my face did me good.

Oh, God, but I was heartsore and miserable beyond belief as I stopped at the club, and sent in word to papa that I was waiting. But it was of no use. The message that came back to me, when I had waited what seemed a long time, was that Lord Rushbury was not there.

Just as this message was given to me, I saw some one stop short, coming down the club steps, and raise his hat to me.

It was Sir Arnold Banbury. He came quickly to the cab door.

"Lady Cecilia, I'm most awfully glad to see you. It was you, I suppose, who sent in to inquire for Lord Rushbury?"

"Yes," said I.

"What a shame not to keep his appointment!"

"I had no appointment. I came here for him on the chance. Do you, by any chance, know where he is?"

"I fancy he's at Newmarket. But if you don't mind waiting a few minutes I'll go and try to find out."

"Thank you. It's very good of you."

He ran up the steps again, while I waited, sitting back in the cab, not quite knowing whether I was glad to have met some one who would not mind how much trouble he took on my account, or whether I was — sorry.

It was quite ten minutes before he came out again, and then he was full of apologies for having kept me waiting. He had ransacked the club, and got himself sworn at half a dozen times, he told me, in the endeavor to procure me information. But the news he brought was disappointing: Papa was at Newmarket.

I thanked him, and I suppose he saw that I was worried. He looked at me very eagerly, and said:

"Isn't there anything I can do for you, Lady Cecilia?"

I shook my head.

But he persisted.

"Surely, surely there's something I can do! What did you want with Lord Rushbury? Isn't it something that I can do instead?"

I hesitated. A reckless feeling of unrest was upon me, which made me feel as if I could not go back alone to be miserable all by myself. I felt a strong resentment against Gerald, who had deserted me like this, without a word of explanation or kindness. Why should I sit at home torturing myself, while he was engaged with clients who seemed to him so much more important than his own wife?

"I wanted him to — to take me out to dinner," I said, with a sort of defiance in my heart.

Sir Arnold beamed with delight and eagerness.

"Won't I do as well? Oh, Lady Cecilia, do let me take you to dine somewhere! Wherever you like! The Carlton, the Savoy — Prince's —"

"I don't like to trouble you," I said.

I had to force myself to say it, and my voice trembled as I said the words. I was quite conscious of what I was doing, but I felt as if I *must* do something reckless, silly, unwise. I had been tortured and

insulted, without a word being said in my defense. Knowing as I did that what I was now contemplating was the very worst thing in the world to do, the thing most likely to make people believe all the scandalous lies Harriet had told about me, I felt as if it was the only relief possible to the tension of my nerves.

"Trouble! Oh, Lady Cecilia, you know there's nothing in the world would give me half so much pleasure."

"Oh, I assure you you won't find any pleasure in it! I've been teased and worried all day long, and I'm so cross that I shall be the dullest and most disagreeable person in the world!"

He bent his head to look into my face.

"Not to me," he whispered. "Do say yes."

I had practically said it already, and he jumped into the cab, after directing the driver to the Savoy.

I suppose that any one who saw me there as we sat at dinner would have thought I was enjoying myself very much; for I talked very fast, though I don't remember a word I said, and I laughed a good deal, and I let Sir Arnold pay me a great many stupid compliments, which I derided even as he made them.

I caught sight of two or three faces I knew, and I noted that curious veiled look out of the eyes of the men which showed me what they thought.

But I did not care. I was maddened by the way in which I had been treated, and nothing seemed to matter.

If Gerald did not care for me any longer, why should I trouble my head about men's looks or anything else?

I was conscious all the time of a feeling of horrible soreness at the way in which destiny had treated me,

but there was no time to think, and so I just talked, and laughed, with a pain at my heart which was like an open wound.

Every now and then, in a pause in the talk, I looked round at the pretty women in their handsome dresses, at the jewels they wore, at their animated faces, and wondered whether any of them were feeling, as I was feeling, as if the world had come to an end and nothing mattered any more.

It seemed so strange that what was a tragedy to me should be happening in this pretty room, with the sparkling glass and silver, and the softly shaded lights, and amidst all the hum and buzz of gay talk and laughter.

What was it? Tragedy? Or comedy?

When I got that thought into my head the words seemed to ring in my head to a tune: Tragedy—Comedy—Tragedy—Comedy, so that I could scarcely hear anything else.

And then I wondered how it was that a sane person, such as I suppose Sir Arnold must be considered, could talk to me for an hour without noticing that anything was wrong.

Or did he notice it, and have the sense to say nothing? I tried to think this out even while I appeared to listen to the things he was saying, and every now and then I wondered if I was answering all right. And sometimes I would look round me, wondering whether I had laughed loudly, or done anything to attract attention. For it seemed impossible that I could so thoroughly have lost consciousness of what was going on around me without giving some sign of the extraordinary state of my feelings.

But nobody seemed to be taking any notice of us, and I presently began to feel more sure of myself,

and to leave off talking to listen, or pretend to listen, which was much easier.

I think the very first thing that struck me strongly enough for me to remember it afterwards was when Sir Arnold, bending forward across the table, said, in a low voice:

"I can't bear to see you looking so sad, Lady Cecilia."

I tried to smile.

"Do I look sad?" I said.

"Not always, but you do now and then," he said gently. "It gives one a sort of stab to see you looking anything but bright and happy, you, who ought to live a life of roses, and—and everything that's good and beautiful and sweet."

I laughed at him, but I was soothed by his sympathy, which was at least sincere.

"If that is what I ought to have," I said, "I have been most badly treated, for certainly my experience has been anything but one of roses!"

He looked more affectionate than ever, and said, in a low voice:

"You have had hard luck. But the luck will turn. Oh, yes, it will. I can promise you that."

I shook my head.

"It has given no sign, at present, of any such intention," I said.

"Well, you may take my word for it. I can foretell your future better than anybody else," said he, confidently.

"I can only hope you are a better prophet than I think you," I said.

It was becoming more and more difficult for me to keep up the tone of levity at which we had started. A sudden wave of depression had passed over me in

the midst of all the gay hum of talk and laughter; the lights seemed to grow dim, and there darted into my mind the thought of what the room would look like in two hours' time, when the lights were out and the people all gone. I tried to see it like that, with the bare tables, and the silence, and it occurred to me that it must be like the change of death.

Suddenly I heard Sir Arnold's voice again, and I wondered whether he had been talking all the time without my hearing him.

"Will you go to a theater?" he said. "Do let me take you to see one of the musical shows. We shall be in time for the second act at the Gaiety or Daly's. An awfully good show at Daly's. Have you seen it?"

But I shook my head. It was no instinct of discretion which made me do so; I seemed to have forgotten how to care what I did. But I felt that I had had enough of other people's gayety; it had begun to irritate me to see merry faces and to hear laughter around me.

"I think my head aches," I said. "The lights would make it worse."

Sir Arnold leaned forward.

"Well, let us get into a taxi," said he, "and we will go a little way—through the parks—or anywhere to get a breath of fresh air. The night is quite fine, and it isn't cold."

Even then I never gave my prudery, or my discretion a thought. But I hesitated. Should I go with him? I knew what I was doing. I knew, too, that I was glad to have him with me. He was affectionate, and discreet, and his presence was soothing. I felt so safe with him; it was so unnecessary to try to be anything but what I chose. He was satisfied with that.

Why can't one's own husband be satisfied too?

I was hesitating, and he pressed the point, ever so cleverly. He did not say too much, or too little: he merely emphasized the fact that I wanted fresh air, and that if I took his suggestion I should have it without trouble.

At last I made up my mind suddenly:

"Yes," said I. "Let us get out into the open air."

We rose and left the room and went out into the street. I was glad to have got out of the hot rooms and to be where I could feel fresh air upon my face, even if it was rather cold.

The next moment there was a taxicab in front of us, the door was being held open, and I got inside. It was closed.

"Tell the man to open it," I said.

Sir Arnold hesitated.

"Won't you catch cold?" he ventured.

"No," said I sharply. "I want it open, open, so that I can have air, plenty of air."

I was getting frightened, not with any feeling of prudence or discretion, but with a consciousness that I was not well, and a fear, new to me, that I might faint or do something foolish and unusual of that kind.

Sir Arnold had the cab opened, and gave the man directions in a voice too low for me to hear. We started, and I was conscious of the first really pleasurable sensation I had felt that evening, as I watched that fascinating dazzling picture, of London at night, flashing past us as we drove westward.

Sir Arnold did exactly the right thing. He saw, I suppose, that I was looking tired and overwrought, and he kept silence till we had got into Piccadilly,

where, the trend of the traffic being all the other way, we could go fast.

At last he said:

"Shall we go out as far as Richmond? We shall be there in no time."

"Richmond!"

I echoed the word, with a sudden remembrance of what this escapade would mean when related by unsympathetic tongues.

I sat up and looked round at him.

"No," I said quickly. "I don't want to go as far as that. We can drive once round the Park and then you can take me back to Curzon Street."

Sir Arnold said nothing for a moment, but in the meantime we had passed the park gates and I noticed, what I might have known, that they were shut, so that to go through the Park, as I had suggested, was out of the question.

I turned to him quickly.

"We'd better go straight back now," I said.

"Why? You are alone this evening, aren't you? If you go back, you will be depressed and miserable. I don't mean to say that my society is very enlivening; but at any rate, if I can give you nothing else, I can give you — sympathy."

He dropped his voice, and inclined his head a little nearer to mine. I said nothing, and I did not move. I saw what I had brought upon myself, I saw the look in his eyes which I had never seen in them before, and I was frightened.

"Tell the driver 'Curzon Street,'" I said shortly.

Sir Arnold shook his head.

"Not yet," he said in a different voice. "If there were some one waiting for you there, some one who would be good to you, I would take you back at



once. But there isn't, you know. Lady Cecilia, you are one of the unhappy army of charming women who are what the French call '*femmes incomprises*.' At least, you think so—you have a right to think so. But have you never considered that there is always sympathy in the world for a beautiful woman who is lonely or neglected—"

"Neglected!" I interrupted sharply.

He answered with fire which I had not expected in him, and I realized the difference between the man who is at your mercy and the same man when you are at his.

"Yes," he said. "I know your secret. Forgive me, Lady Cecilia, for I will keep it. You know you may depend upon me. I know you have been unfairly treated, that you have given your heart without return. Oh, why should we talk round a fact which is common property?"

I drew back, shuddering.

"Common property!" I echoed, still unable to collect my thoughts.

"Well, if I may dare to say so, we all know that you are not treated as you deserve to be treated, that you are not understood, not happy!"

"Who says such things?"

"Don't be angry. There is no denying it, is there? Your action to-night—forgive me for saying so—but is it that of a happily mated woman? You are driven to find sympathy and kindness from your father. That is clear. You have been wounded, thrown back on yourself. Ah, Lady Cecilia, I can read you like a book. You turn instinctively to the quarter where you know you will get admiration, and sympathy, and devotion, and—love."

As he said the last word, the little wretch dared

to seize my left hand, and to hold it so firmly that I could not get it away.

It seems incredible to me, now, that this was the very first moment in which I realized the folly of what I was doing. Or rather, it was the first moment of my understanding that, after all, I did care.

I seemed to be waking suddenly out of a dream, and to find the reality worse than the nightmare I was roused out of.

"Don't," I said sharply. "Why don't you see that — that I'm — not — like that?"

He dropped my hand and looked at me.

"Then I don't understand you," he said shortly.

I took courage directly. After all, I wasn't really afraid of *him*, only of myself, and of my madness.

"Of course you don't understand me," I said. "I don't understand myself. Why am I behaving like a madwoman to-night? I can't tell you. Why am I doing all the things that I think detestable in other women? I don't know. Why am I a fool? I can't answer."

For a moment he said nothing. He had sat back in his corner, and was looking at me as if I had been transformed from a lamb to a lion before his eyes. And yet I was not angry, or harsh, or loud; I was only miserable, and quite suddenly ready to show him how miserable I was.

"Really," he said at last, "it's very, very difficult to make out what a woman means."

I bowed my head in assent.

"I don't see how it can be anything but difficult," I said, "when she doesn't know herself."

He relaxed his attitude of annoyance, and seemed to become simply interested and puzzled.

"I wish," he said, "even if it's difficult, Lady Cecilia, that you would try to explain," he said.

"I will. I'm so miserable that I don't know what to do with myself, so miserable that, if I'd had to pass the evening by myself, I think I should have thrown myself out of window."

"You have quarreled with your husband?"

"Worse than that." I stopped: I couldn't go on. His tone became suddenly different, kinder, gentler.

"Worse?"

"Yes. I can't tell you. I can't explain. But something has come between us—at least—it's a woman, of course—you know who it is, I think. She has—she has spoilt everything, my life—my husband. Oh, I can't talk about it. I've gone through such a scene this afternoon that I feel broken, bruised, I feel mad. Do you see? I can't tell you more about it than that. She says things of me that are not true. And I believe she has made him believe them. There. Oh, if you don't know all about it, I believe you can guess."

I had let myself go, and spoken simply and stupidly, like a child. Somehow I felt that the truth was so awful that I had only to speak it for him to be kind, to be sorry.

And so he was. I felt I loved the little fellow when he suddenly slapped my hand quite smartly, and said:

"Cheer up! We'll see what we can do. I've been rather let in, made a fool of, haven't I? But I'm glad you met me, very glad. Look here. I think I can help."

"Oh, Sir Arnold, you are a dear," I said, brokenly.

Although I did not quite believe that he could do any good for me, there was something so really honest

and good-natured, so *just right* in the way he was behaving, that I felt thoroughly ashamed of myself and grateful to him.

"There," said he, "that's worth anything, to hear you speak like that. You're the loveliest woman in the world, Lady Cecilia; you must let me have the satisfaction of saying that, and if I can't make you happy myself, I must see you happy somehow."

Comforted as I was by his tone, I knew that he was professing to have powers which he did not possess. But I tried to smile.

"It has done me good already," I said, "to find you so nice. Will you forgive me for — for — oh, for being such a foolish creature?"

"I won't make it up with you," he said, "unless you tell me something more. As you say, I can guess something. But it will be best for you to let me know a little more. Will you trust me with the story of this dreadful afternoon?"

I nodded. He knew enough already to understand, with surprisingly few words, just how the matter stood. He seemed greatly shocked by the story, and could, I think, scarcely believe that I was not exaggerating when I told him what Harriet had said.

"How could she dare to stand up to them," he said wonderingly, "when all the world knows so much?"

"She's going to 'bluff' it," I said, sobbing.

He sat back, looking amazed.

"She has wonderful nerve," he said. "But really I don't think she can hold to such a story. And as for her accusing you — it's incredible. Surely you don't think your husband believes her!"

"I shouldn't have thought it possible," said I, with the tears running down my cheeks, "but I heard her with my own ears, and — my husband — never

said a word, never contradicted her. And — and he went out with her, and saw her off, and then he drove off with Sir John, without a word to me, without a single word.”

I had hard work to control myself, and he sat gently trying to encourage me, repeating that nobody could believe her story against mine.

But I stopped him.

“You are wrong there,” I said. “Among the people we know — Lady Langbourne and her set — you know that she will be believed rather than me. For they look upon her as a normal person, and upon me as an abnormal one, because — because —” I stopped short, rather ashamed, in the face of what I had been doing, to take to myself the credit of being different from these others.

But he took me up very sweetly.

“Because you are wholly different from Lady Usher.”

It was comforting to hear him say so, though I could not quite feel, at the moment, that I deserved it. I dried my eyes, however, and felt a little soothed.

Not for long, though. Now that I was being brought back to myself, I began to realize more plainly than before what it was that I had done, and I wondered what would be said, and how many people had seen me at the Savoy with Sir Arnold.

“It’s all so dreadful,” I said, whimpering.

“By Jove, yes, it’s jolly hard lines. But it’s not so bad, I’m sure, as you think. Look here, Lady Cecilia, I see that you’re fond of your husband, and I’m sure it’s impossible for any sane man to have the love of such a woman as you are without appreciating it. Listen. Don’t give way as you have done, but wait, and hear what he has to say when he comes

back. These lawyer chaps are not quite like other men; they have so many secrets to keep for other people that they get into the way of keeping their own, I believe. So cheer up; and don't worry yourself by thinking that Calstock will believe Lady Usher's story rather than yours."

"Ah!" I cried. "That's just the worst of it! It's just 'Lady Cecilia's story against Lady Usher's story.' Don't you see?"

"But in the one case there are proofs," said he.

And then I fancy he checked himself, as if he were on the point of saying something more, and then changed his mind about it.

"Well," said I, "I wish I knew how to get proofs."

"There are plenty of people about who know everything," said Sir Arnold.

"Oh, yes, I dare say there are," said I. "But they are just the people who won't tell."

"Why, of course. It's such a difficult matter to give away a lady!"

I looked at him intently. I could see that he himself must know something important, but that he would not say what it was.

I sighed.

"Yes. You could help me if you would," I said plaintively.

He shook his head.

"It's so confoundedly difficult," he said with a sort of abashed air.

"Yes," said I. "It's so difficult for anybody to tell the truth about her, well as it is known, that I think I shall find myself cut by everybody, and perhaps separated from my own husband, just because I took her part and tried to keep a secret which it seems everybody knew to be no secret."

Sir Arnold looked distressed.

"By Jove," he said, "we mustn't let it come to that. I shouldn't mind so much, but that you care so deeply."

"Of course I do," I said resentfully. "I've made the great mistake, Sir Arnold, of being fond of my own husband."

"Well, that's a fault you'll soon grow out of if he doesn't treat you better."

I sat back again, tired out and depressed. After a short silence, he asked:

"Can't Calstock find out how matters really stand? It seems too absurd to suppose that an experienced solicitor shouldn't be able to find tons of witnesses to prove what everybody knows."

I shook my head.

"It's just because everybody does know it that it's so difficult to prove," I said. "It's become a sort of society secret, and everybody is in the conspiracy to keep it. It seems to me," I said, with a burst of moral indignation which must have sounded rather odd from me, considering all the circumstances, I afterwards thought, "that there's a great deal more sympathy for a woman who is fond of a man who isn't her husband than for one who is fond of the man who is."

"By Jove, you're right, I'm afraid. But cheer up, Lady Cecilia. We may be rather rocky on the moral side, but we can't let you suffer for your eccentricity in caring for your husband."

"Oh, you are laughing at me, of course," I whimpered.

"On my honor I'm not. I never felt so sorry for any one before, and I'm racking my brains to think of a way out of this *impasse*. Unluckily, brains are

not my strong point. Look here, Lady Cecilia, you've got a brain to your hand. Why don't you get hold of your husband, and put it all to him, from first to last, not hiding anything?"

I began to cry again.

"That's just what I should have done," I said, "if I had been able to see him to-day. Now —"

And I broke down again.

Sir Arnold went on with energy:

"Now, there's all the more reason why you should be quite frank with him. Tell him every blessed thing, from first to last. And look here, you don't mind my advising you, do you? You won't think I'm taking an infernal liberty?"

"No. Of course I shan't. I'm very grateful."

"Well, then, don't make the mistake nearly all ladies make when they go to a lawyer — even perhaps when he is their own husband — of keeping something back. Tell him everything, everything, from first to last."

I looked at him shyly.

"I shall have to tell him about *you*," I said.

He laughed.

"Well, there isn't so much to tell, is there?" And he had the audacity to spoil it all by adding, mischievously, under his breath, "Worse luck!"

I tried to look dignified, a poor attempt, in the circumstances.

"Thank you very much for your advice," I said.

"I know it is good, and I shall follow it."

"And will you let me know what happens?"

I hesitated, and began to feel frightened again.

"I'm very much afraid," I said, "that nothing will happen. There will be just an uneasy feeling that something is wrong, and instead of its being only



Sir John and his wife who suffer from it, my husband and I will feel it too."

He said nothing, but frowned intently.

"You see," I said, "there's only one way for things to come right for me; it's for the truth to be known about some one else." He nodded. "Well, the people who would be believed won't speak, and those who will speak won't be believed."

"Who are the people who will speak?"

"Servants," I said.

He nodded.

"Harriet can defy and deny where they are concerned," I went on, "and she will. Now, if you please, let me go back to Curzon Street."

He gave the direction to the driver, and we drove quickly back, saying very little all the way. I had long since lost all that frenzied feeling of defiance and despair with which I had begun the evening. I was worn out, sick at heart, and desperately alarmed at the situation in which my own folly had placed me.

Sir Arnold saw this, and was very kind, in the nicest way, too. He did not make me talk, and when I reached home, he was anxious to disappear before the door could be opened. But I would not allow that. I had made up my mind to be frank with Gerald from first to last, and I would not have any small mysteries. So I bade him good-by, and came in, and went straight up to my own room.

Lindsay looked horribly alarmed when she met me, so I suppose I was looking a wreck, as indeed I felt. But I was so tired that, in spite of all my troubles, I fell asleep almost as soon as I laid my head on the pillow.

But this morning I have been very, very miserable. I was hoping I might get a note or a wire from

Gerald, but I have had no message, and I don't know what to think. I wish he would come back early and get it over. The suspense I am in is dreadful to bear, and I am afraid that, if he doesn't come back soon, I shall lose my courage, and be afraid to tell him everything. I have had time to write all this, and it is luncheon-time, but I know I shan't be able to eat anything.

What will Gerald say to me? When he hears about Sir Arnold — and I will tell him — I must — will he think I am really as bad as Harriet after all? And will he wonder which of us two to believe?

CURZON STREET,  
*October 14th.*

It is all over.

When Gerald came back last night, it was dinner-time, and I was in such a state of terror and anxiety that when I found him grave, and stern, and abrupt, my heart failed me altogether, and I began to think I could never tell him everything, as I had intended to do.

He said nothing to me of any importance before dinner, but just kissed me and went away at once to dress. When I got downstairs, I found him already in the dining-room, and then we had to talk about nothing while Jackson was going in and out, and afterwards Gerald went straight to his study.

By that time I had begun to feel as if the confession I had made up my mind to was too hard for me. Gerald looked so strangely aloof, and grave, and self-absorbed, that I felt it would be impossible for me to tell all about my folly of last night.

Still, I could not make out what he believed about me and Harriet, but yet I did not know whether I had hoped for or feared the interview which would have to be got through.

Presently I heard Jackson's step outside, not Gerald's. He brought a message, asking if I would go into the study.

I felt as if I could scarcely walk, for the next half-hour would decide our future. If it was Harriet who

had got hold of him, and estranged him from me, I should know the truth now.

When I got to the study Gerald was standing on the hearthrug, and I shut the door and remained standing a long way from him.

"Sit down, Cecilia," he began, "I want to talk to you."

He wheeled an arm-chair round so that when I sat down I was face to face with him, and then he stood back again, with his hands behind him.

For a few moments, he said nothing more, and I could feel that the muscles of my face were quivering, and I could not keep my fingers still.

"I feel, Cecilia," he began at last, "that I owe you an apology for the way in which I had to run away yesterday, after that interview with Sir John and his wife, which must have been so exceedingly painful for you."

Though these words sounded rather stiff and formal, the tone in which he uttered them was so kind, so affectionate, that I was suddenly overcome by a sense of my own folly in behaving as I had done since then, and by the feeling that I had perhaps done more to estrange him from me than anybody else had succeeded in doing. I struggled for a moment with my feelings, and I tried to speak, but my voice failed me, and I burst into a passion of tears and sobs.

Leaning over the arm of the chair I cried as if my heart would break, and presently I felt Gerald's hand laid tenderly on my head.

"Don't cry, child, don't cry," said he gently. "It has been a terrible time for both of us, and unfortunately I don't see my way clear, even now. But it has been worse for you than for me, though I couldn't help myself. Will you forgive me, Cis?"

Gerald so seldom calls me anything but "Cecilia" that I was touched by his use of my pet name, and, suddenly springing up, I threw myself into his arms.

"Oh, Gerald, Gerald," I cried, "don't you know, dear, what torture you've made me suffer? Don't you know how cruel you've been to me?"

To my surprise, I saw his face change and a look of the deepest contrition come over his features.

"Yes, Cis, I'm afraid I do know it," he said. And his voice trembled. "But I couldn't help myself. I've had to do the most difficult thing that ever came to me in the whole course of my professional experience, and I'm afraid it has mastered me after all."

I was holding his arms, and staring into his face.

"What do you mean?" I asked in a very hoarse voice.

He hesitated a moment, and then shook his head.

"I'd rather you didn't ask me, dear," he said at last.

I saw his face contract, as it were, and go back into the old lines, and I knew that my chance of learning the truth was slipping away. But I would not let him treat me like that: I knew that, if once I were to lose this opportunity of learning all the real story, just while he seemed to be in a softened and indulgent mood, I should never get it again. And, realizing how much in our lives depended upon what we did now, I held him the more tightly, and spoke in a fierce tone, energetically, passionately.

"You must tell me, you must, you must," I said.

But he shook his head.

"I can't, Cis," he said. "It's a rule with me never to talk about the affairs of my clients."

"Very well, then," I cried. "If you won't be human, if you won't be kind, if you prefer doing justice to your clients to doing justice to your wife, you

can't be surprised if she has her own secrets from you."

He was startled, I could see. I tore myself out of his arms, when he wanted to keep me firmly, and I got behind the big chair I had been sitting in, and I said, drawing my breath so sharply between the words that I think I must have been almost unintelligible:

"You've treated me very badly, Gerald. You've let another woman tell the most shocking stories about me, stories which you knew were untrue, without contradicting her. You ran away from me, and you saw her into the cab, and you stood talking to her, after she'd done this, after it, mind! And then you left me without one word. Well, I dare say you are right in thinking your own affairs, and those of your clients, more important than me. But you've treated me shockingly. You've nearly broken my heart. And — and when — when they tell you I've been seen with somebody else — with another man — dining with him — driving with him — a man who is nice to me and who doesn't expect me to be anything but a human being — well, you will know it was your treatment made me do it!"

Gerald had seized the edge of the writing-table and was leaning upon it, his face like yellow wax. I was shocked at the change in him. He looked like a dead man, and when he spoke, his voice was quite unlike his.

"What do you mean? It's not true! You! You! My proud, beautiful Cecilia! No. It's only a trick to frighten me. God, it's only a trick, a lie! Tell me it's a lie."

He leaped across the room, and, seizing my arm, swung me away from the chair and into the middle of the floor. But I was not frightened, though he looked dreadful. I knew that my chance had come

with him: I knew that I could make him understand and be sorry, once and for all.

"Yes, it's true," I said, and I opened my eyes wide and looked into his. "I went to the club to find papa last night, because I could not bear to be alone after the way you'd treated me. And he wasn't there, but Sir Arnold Banbury was."

"Sir Arnold Banbury! Surely you never —"

"Yes, I did, I did. I let him take me to the Savoy to dinner, and then —"

Gerald tried to ask a question, but he could not. His face worked so convulsively that I thought he would fall down in a fit, and I hurried on:

"I went for a drive with him — down Piccadilly and — and nearly as far as Barnes. And oh, Gerald, it was your fault, your fault. And if — if I'd been a Harriet, it would have served you right."

He threw me off and staggered into a chair. I would not be rebuffed now, but I took hold of the arm of the chair he was sitting in, and I said:

"It was your own fault, your own fault. No woman could suffer what I did yesterday, and — and take it quietly. No woman could, no woman."

He started to his feet, and seized my arm.

"Cecilia, do you mean that you care for the fellow?"

"I won't answer that," I said boldly. "I won't tell you what I feel for him. You don't deserve it."

He was staring at me, right into my eyes. For a few moments I felt anxious, and felt that my fate and his were trembling in the balance. Then, suddenly, his face seemed to break up, and he stretched out his arms.

"God bless you, child, you couldn't. You couldn't. But you gave me a fright, Cis, indeed you did."

"And don't you deserve a fright? Oh, Gerald!"

"I'm afraid I do."

He tried to take me into his arms, but I wouldn't let him.

"No," I said, "I don't want to be kissed."

"Come, yes, you do. You want to be forgiven."

"No, no, I don't. I won't be forgiven. It's I whose forgiveness has to be asked, and listen, Gerald, I won't give it, unless you tell me everything."

"My dear, professional secrets—"

"I don't care whether they're professional or not. You must tell me why you went away, and what you did, and whether you believe the truth about Harriet. You don't suppose I'm going to be satisfied with less, now, do you, Gerald?"

He was surprised at the firmness I showed, and though he tried to coax me, and to soften me with affectionate words, and attempted caresses, I would have none of them, and at last I said:

"Gerald, don't you think you owe it to me to tell me all the truth as you know it?"

He looked at me very intently, and said:

"I think I shall have to make a compromise. Will you confess that it was you who began this by keeping secrets from me?"

I was taken aback, for under the sense of my own grievances I had forgotten this.

"Ye—es, I suppose I did. At least—I kept one secret; I couldn't help myself. If you'll tell me what you know, I'll tell you what I do."

And I told him the whole story of the adventure at Cowes, of Harriet's following me to Southsea, and making me swear not to betray her, and of my agreeing, on condition that she never offended again.

Then, Gerald leading me on by a question here and



there, I told all about the night at Four Oaks, and he listened without any comment at all. Then I asked him for his confidence in return.

And he gave it, at last, without hesitation.

"Since I must tell you, you shall know everything without reservation," said he. "I am, as you know — have been for some time — Sir John Usher's principal legal adviser, and it was not only to my interest, but in accordance with my inclination that I should do my very best to solve the difficulty he has been in with regard to his wife."

"You mean — he wants to divorce her?" I said.

"No. He knows he has a right to suspect her, but he hasn't been able to prove anything against her. He is a man of strong affections, but not one of those who can forgive the worst. Even if he could, I should be sorry to see him do so, for I am convinced that Lady Usher is not a woman who could be trusted, even if she were forgiven and taken back."

I bowed my head in vigorous assent.

"I knew when you came back from Cowes that you could help me if you would, knew that you were keeping something from me which it was of vital importance for me to know. You can see the difficulty in which I found myself. How could I wrest a secret from you, when, by doing so, I should have to force you to become a witness in one of the ugliest scandals of the day? If you could have proved that Sir John's suspicions of his wife were justified, you would have had to give evidence in the divorce court, and that is an ordeal which I could not call upon you to face. So I had to try other methods. But the worst of it was that, knowing you to be bound by your promise or oath to her, I dared not tell you the business upon which I was engaged."

A light was breaking upon me, and I was asking myself now why this view had never occurred to me before. He went on:

"I had to avert your suspicions of what I was doing by every means in my power. I had to allow you to receive Lady Usher; I had to suffer her to try her arts upon me, and in the course of this process I was able to make up my mind about her in the most conclusive manner. Your cousin is, I am sorry to say, one of the most depraved and nauseating persons it has ever been my lot to encounter."

I was breathing more freely already.

"I thought—I was afraid—she was fascinating you!" I gasped.

"And I had to let you think so, because the one thing I feared was that you might get an inkling of the course I was following, and that the artful Lady Usher should worm the truth out of you."

"Oh, Gerald! It's horrid! It was a plot on your part! And against a woman!"

He seemed quite unmoved.

"It was a plot to rid a man of one of the most worthless wives that ever brought a curse instead of a blessing into a man's household," said he dryly. "It was no case of laying a trap for an innocent woman. It was for me to hold my own against the wiles of a most artful and vile creature, unfit for the confidence of any woman, or of the love of any decent man."

"Gerald!"

He nodded.

"That is nothing but the truth."

"And you didn't admire her?"

"In a sense I admired her very much; and I understood the attraction she had for poor Sir John. But

the more I saw of her, the more I disliked her, and when she tried her arts upon me, visiting me at my office, sending for me to visit her at her cottage up the river —”

“Ah! Why didn’t you let me know you visited her?”

“Because you would have been curious, and I could not tell you the truth. I had to let her think I was on her side, while, all the while, I was acting solely in the interests of my client, Sir John.”

“But that was double-faced!”

“Not at all. She knew in what capacity I was acting, and it was at her own risk that she tried to divert me from my duty to my client.”

“Gerald! You frighten me. You are too clever!”

“Not at all. She’s too clever for me. I got nothing by my visits, though she made me repeat them, always with the promise held out that she would make me some confession, which she never did. Then I went down to Cowes, by Sir John’s wish, to make inquiries myself. I could not let you know where I was, and I had to take elaborate precautions against your finding out; for the same reason as before.”

“I see. Then it was you who found the witnesses?”

“Yes.”

“And can they prove anything?”

“Oh, yes. Unfortunately, however, Lady Usher has again outwitted us. She met these people to-day at my office, in the presence of Sir John and myself. But she questioned them so cleverly, she rubbed them up the wrong way so artfully, she tripped them up with so much astuteness, that I believe, if we were to bring them into the witness box, to swear to what they saw, her counsel, instructed by her, would cause their

evidence to break down, or to appear to break down, which amounts to the same thing."

"And what will happen?"

"I don't quite know yet. What I dread the most is that he should forgive her; for she is totally unworthy of his generosity, and the reckless way in which she tried to involve you in order to shield herself puts her outside the pale of all sympathy."

"What does Sir John believe now?"

Gerald frowned.

"I am sorry to say he is inclined to believe her against everybody, and even to take her back."

I uttered a little cry.

"But in that case it means that he must believe her story about me!"

"That's it exactly," said Gerald with a frown. "That is the present position. Lady Usher worked upon his feelings yesterday, as you saw. And, if I had not gone away with him as I did, and stayed with him, I fancy she would have succeeded in getting at him, and in persuading him to make it up. At the expense of a blow to your reputation which it would never have recovered from."

I uttered a little cry.

"And what will happen now?" I asked quickly.

"I don't know. She is guilty, without a doubt: she is a wicked, dangerous and venomous woman, unfit to be Sir John's wife, or the mother of her own children. But how to bring her guilt home to her, and to convince Sir John, I don't for the moment know. I have worked hard, and at present without result."

I was overwhelmed at the thought of what this would mean to us both. I could see the ugly scandal which would hang over me for ever if Harriet were

to go back to her husband. I could see the failure of my husband's tireless efforts to serve his client in the way of bringing home to him the truth about the woman he had married, the woman who, having deceived him, was ready to deceive him again, and to blast the reputation of an innocent woman to save herself.

We sat a long time in silence, even the knowledge that my own fears about my husband were groundless failing to make me happy, in the face of his depression and anxiety.

And then, when we were still sitting in the study, talking in whispers for a few moments, and then dropping into silence for a while, the unexpected happened.

Jackson came in with a large envelope on a salver. It had been brought by a district messenger, he said, and it was directed, in a round, boyish handwriting, which neither of us knew, to Gerald.

He opened it, and then I saw him stand for a moment very still, staring at something which he had taken out of it.

Then he crossed the room quickly, sat down at his desk, and began to read, slowly and deliberately, two or three sheets of closely written paper, which the envelope contained.

I didn't dare to speak, but something made me think this packet was connected with the affair of Sir John and Harriet.

At last he called me, and I ran across to his side.

"Cis," said he, "I have got what I wanted."

"What is it?" I asked tremulously.

"Three letters from Lady Usher to Lord Hugh Hawkhurst, which leave no doubt as to their relationship. And, though they are not dated, the postmarks

supply that omission. Your character will be cleared, my child, when the case comes on."

I looked at the envelope.

"But who sent you the letters?" I asked.

Gerald shook his head.

"I don't know, I'm not meant to know, and I shall not inquire," said he.

I flung my arms round his neck.

By one of those instincts which men laugh at, but by which we women know things which they have to find out, I was sure that, whether sent by him or not, the letters reached Gerald's hands through the instrumentality of Sir Arnold Banbury.

So he really is quite a dear after all, for he has fulfilled his own prophecy, and I am going to be happy again!

I thank him with all my heart, and I will never, never keep a secret from Gerald again.

Thank God it is all right between us once more! Oh, thank God, thank God!

Six months after the date of the last entry in the above diary the case of Sir John Usher, with Lady Usher as respondent and Lord Hugh Hawkhurst as co-respondent, was heard in the divorce court, and the petitioner obtained a decree nisi.

THE END

---

---

ARE YOU INTERESTED  
in the Preservation of the Race?

*Then Read the New Novel*

## “HER REASON”

¶ This startling anonymous work of a well-known English novelist is a frank exposure of Modern Marriage.

¶ In the state of nature, animals tend to improve through sexual selection. But among the human race to-day a very different process is at work, particularly among *the rich, whose daughters are annually offered for sale in the markets of the world.* “HER REASON” shows the deplorable results.

SHALL OUR WOMEN  
BE SACRIFICED?

PRICE \$1.25 NET; POSTAGE, 10 CENTS EXTRA

THE MACAULAY COMPANY, Publishers  
15 WEST 38th STREET NEW YORK

---

---

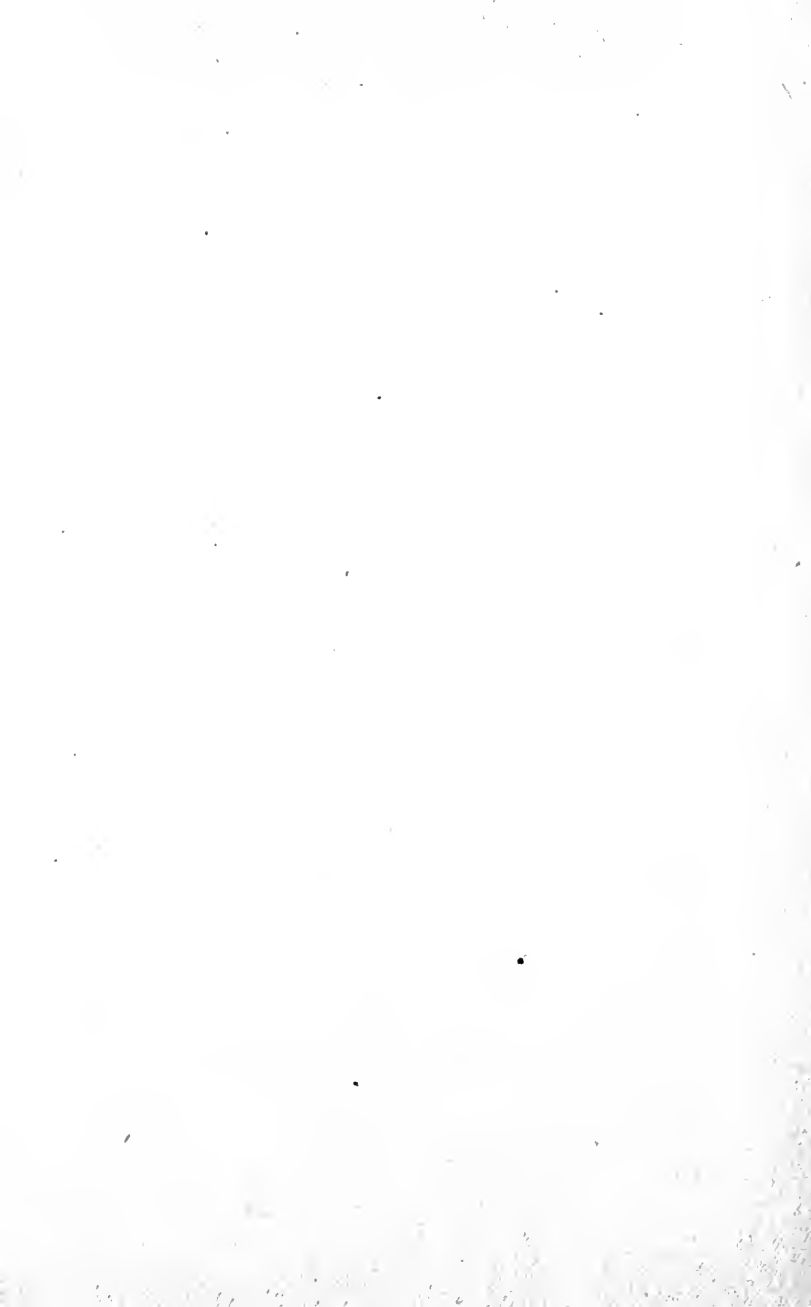












UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



**A** 000 128 199 7

